

A Happy Hero

Gu Long

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(**欢乐英雄 / Huānlè Yīng Xióng**)
by
Gu Long



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Unfortunately there does not appear to be a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience. Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

We are behold to Tiger Wong, Hoju and others for their efforts.

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<http://wuxiatranslations.wikispaces.com>

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<http://wuxiasociety.com>

Other good sources for translations are

<http://www.lannyland.com>

<http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/forumdisplay.php/29-Wuxia-Translations>

<http://xiaoshuo.genreverse.com>

http://haddjo.freehostia.com/joomla_1.5.3/index.php

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 - Understanding of, and enthusiasm for, wuxia, martial arts, Chinese literature and history.
 - Ability to take the initiative to do further research regarding the terms and idioms used in Chinese to avoid making literal translations.
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Our ultimate goal is to get all the major wuxia works translated and available to English readers in one location

If you or a friend would like to help, please get in touch at N1ghtT1ger71@gmail.com

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Prologue I: Guo DaLu and Wang Dong

Guo DaLu's character matched his name, he truly was a very DaLu person. "DaLu" meant very straightforward, carefree, even a little dense. No matter what the situation, he would not put it to heart.

And yet Wang Dong never moves. [*Dong means motion.]

Straightforward people were usually poor. Guo DaLu was especially poor, ridiculously poor.

He actually shouldn't have been so poor.

Originally, it could be said that he was a man who had a lot of money. When a wealthy person suddenly becomes poor, there can only be two reasons: One, he was stupid. Or two, he was lazy.

Guo DaLu was not stupid, he could do a lot more than most people, and do them better. For example, when it came to riding horses, he could ride the fastest horse and the wildest horse.

When it came to swords, with one stab he could penetrate iron body armor as well as a willow catkin floating with the spring breeze.

If you were his friend, and met him when his mood was especially good, he might jump into the river and catch some carps with his bare hands as well as some wild geese, and make a dish of steamed fish and roasted duck for you to munch on. After eating his dishes, it's guaranteed you won't be disappointed.

His cooking skill was not below that of any of the famous chefs from the capital.

His can perform song renditions on the pipa that would make you think he had been performing since birth.

Some people believe that other than giving birth, he could do anything.

He was also not lazy, not only that but he would constantly be searching for something to do. And the things he has done have not been few. So how could a person like him become poor?

The first thing he tried his hand at was escorting goods.

When he first made his debut, his parents had just died and he either sold or gave away the family's dwelling and properties. He wanted to rely on his own talent, and enter the martial world.

Of course he wasn't a very good businessman, nor was he ever interested in being a good businessman, so he only made 170 liang from selling land that should have been worth 300 liang. And after adding up all the things he gave away to poor relatives and friends, what he had left wasn't much.

But there was still enough for him to purchase a good horse, forge a fast sword, rest at the best inns, and eat at the best restaurants.

Back then it was Spring. Spring was a season when business for escort agencies were at their best

When business is peaking for the escort agencies, that is also the time when business peaks for the robbers.

ZhongYuan Escort Agency's boss was Luo ZhenYi. Although he wasn't old, his worldly experience was, so naturally he understood how it works. Therefore when he was on the road, he was especially careful. It was Spring and the goods he was protecting was not light.

However it is not enough to be careful when you're an escort. Your martial arts also had to be strong, and your luck had to be good.

Luo ZhenYi's martial arts was not weak, but this time his luck was not good to have unexpectedly encountered the most troublesome criminal in the Two Rivers, the OuYang Brothers.

The OuYang Brothers were not two people, nor were they three, or four.....OuYang Brothers was just one person.

Although he was only one person, he was more harder to defeat than forty people. His left hand wielded a short sabre, his right hand wielded a long sabre, and at the same time he could still fire off seven or eight different types of hidden weapons. Very few people can tell where his hidden weapons came from.

Luo ZhenYi also couldn't tell. First he evaded three "Embroidered Headpiece Flower Bolts", and one "Moon Chasing Meteor Arrow", but who knew that with a flip of his sabre, OuYang Brothers shot out another pair of Mother and Child Frost Needles.

Deadly needles, even their victims couldn't figure out where they had come from.

Luo ZhenYi's right shoulder got hit with these needles, and although he didn't die immediately, all he could manage to do now was wait for OuYang Brothers to come take his life.

Even if OuYang Brothers didn't want his life, with his merchandise lost, he could only hang himself and take his own life.

At this moment, a speeding horse suddenly approached. The horse was fast, but the person was faster. Before the horse even reached them, it's rider was already there. OuYang Brothers could only see someone fall from the air, and before he had time to release one of his seven or eight hidden weapons, his left and right arteries were already severed by this person's sword.

This rescuer dropping from the air was naturally Guo DaLu.

Luo ZhenYi was not only grateful towards his rescuer, but also admired him. After dropping off the merchandise, he insisted on inviting him back to the agency.

Guo DaLu naturally went, as he didn't have anything more important to do anyway.

Even if he did have pressing matters, he'd still go.

This was his first time fighting. He suddenly discovered that not only was his martial arts decent, his luck at meeting people was also good.

Luo ZhenYi was a bit perplexed and asked: "With great skills such as Brother Guo's, why not become an escort?".

Guo DaLu did not ask: "Why must a good martial artist become an escort?".

He only thought that being an escort would be very prestigious, very interesting.

For a person who just entered the martial world to become the assistant boss of an escort bureau, it was sufficiently

prestigious, sufficiently remarkable!

The only thing Guo DaLu was a little disappointed about was that ZhongYuan Escort Agency wasn't the biggest escort agency in ZhongYuan. In fact, it wasn't even counted among the top tier of agencies there.

He waited many days before he finally got his first assignment, and it wasn't even a big assignment. Just helping someone from KaiFeng deliver a few thousand dollars to LuoYang.

The journey wasn't far, the merchandise wasn't big, and with such an assistant boss, the boss was naturally able to feel relieved and remained at home to comfortably recover from his injuries.

It was still Spring, early morning. The escort carts started on their way.

The year starts with Spring, the day starts with the morning, it was a good beginning.

The escort banner fluttered in the wind, the shouts of the men resonated loud and clear. Guo DaLu wore a purple vest, with a sheathed sword by his belt and riding a large white horse. The Spring sun was starting to rise, its rays shining warmly on his body and washing across distant jade mountains, young swallows were building nests in the trees.

His heart felt very happy and satisfied.

He only hoped to encounter some bandits. It was not entirely because he wished to prove his worth or raise his prestige. It was because he wanted to make a few more friends.

The more friends the better. He liked having friends. If he could become friends with people like that, it would be an

exciting and interesting thing. And if could persuade them to change their evil ways, that would be more wonderful than mere words could describe.

Then he really met some.

But unfortunately the ones he met were not the type of wealth sharing, hearty eating, hard drinking bandits he'd imagined. Nor did they appear to be the heroic types whose word was their bond and whom would take a few sabre blows for their fellow mates. The ones he encountered were just a group of small-time thieves, with ashen faces as if they haven't eaten for three days. Their clothes were covered with patches, and even their sabres were rusty.

Although Guo DaLu was disappointed, he'd already met them so there wasn't anything he could do about it. First he needed to show off a couple of his moves to stop them in their tracks, then patiently lecture them, hoping that they would turn over a new leaf, become peaceful citizens, and no longer disgrace their ancestors.

At first, his martial arts scared them so much that they were dumbstruck like chickens, but then his teachings got them so emotional, tears flowed out their eyes. Each one of them was determined to become a better person.

"But none of us have any talent, what can we possibly do? If we don't rob, I'm afraid all of us will starve to death."

"Starting a small business is not bad, even if you only sell steamed buns it's still better than being bandits."

"But without a bit of money, what kind of business can we start? Might as well die."

These people, with tears flowing out of their eyes and mucus coming out of their noses, were really a pitiful sight.

Guo DaLu was almost moved to tears as well.

“No money, that’s easy. I have money.”.

Wasn’t the merchandise carts filled with money?

You can’t really start a small business with little money, when Guo DaLu does something he does it in a big way.

“Everybody gets 100 liang.”.

Everyone thanked him profusely, and afterwards they left with cheers. Even from far away, one could hear them say: “Our benefactor is not only a brave hero, he is simply a saint.”.

Guo DaLu’s heart was also burning with emotion: “Man is inherently good, if one wasn’t forced with no other options, who would want to become a robber?”.

By the time he calmed down, he suddenly discovered two things: One, more than half the money in the carts have been distributed away.

Two, that money wasn’t his.

The other escorts in the group all looked at him with wide eyes and gaping mouths. No one could tell what they all thought of him.

A big hero? A saint? Or a retard?

With more than half the merchandise gone, the agency naturally had to compensate for it.

When Guo DaLu returned to the agency, his heart did not feel entirely right, but he was also not too discomforted.

He had confidence that he could make up for this loss, people with talent all have this kind of confidence.

“I bought my horse for 280 liang, and I still have more than 700 liang on me, that adds up to be a bit over 1000 liang. Let’s pay them back first and talk later.”.

What about the rest?

“If the agency can help cover the rest, I can slowly pay it back with my salary as assistant escort boss.”.

For the ZhongYuan Escort Agency to have been able to hire an assistant boss such as himself, in the future it’s fame would surely gradually increase, it’s business would surely get better and better. Of course, his salary couldn’t be too small, he’d be able to repay everything in no time.

Luo ZhenYi was listening to him this whole time, listening until he was completely dumbfounded, listening in total shock.

Guo DaLu was still self-assured, because he thought the plan he came up with made a lot of sense.

He couldn’t imagine that Luo ZhenYi would suddenly kneel down.

Luo ZhenYi wasn’t kneeling to ask him to stay, it was to thank him for saving his life and begging him to leave, the quicker the better, the farther the better.

“You rescued me, I’m helping you pay your debt, let’s call it even. I’ve never seen anyone like you before, Master Guo, I can only pray that I never will again.

Therefore Guo DaLu left.

But where would he go? Right now, even though his belt still carried a sword, even though his clothes were still fresh, he no longer had his big white horse. The few remaining pieces of money he had were no longer enough to allow him to stay at the finest inns. Even if he ate steamed buns and slept on hard pallets, it would not last him several days.

Did Guo DaLu feel a little nervous, a little uncomfortable?

Nope, he didn't care at all.

For a talented man such as himself, why should he fear that there wouldn't be any rice to eat? How could that not be a joke?

He still searched out the best restaurant, with good wine and good dishes, and enjoyed a wonderful meal.

Any man who finished a good meal would be in an especially good mood. Besides, after having six or seven servings of wine, even the most despicable people would become lovable in his eyes.

Therefore he gave all the money he had left to that lovable waiter. Therefore when he stepped out the door, his wallet was washed clean.

Where would the next meal come from? He didn't have a clue.

But how was that of any concern? Now the only thing that mattered was finding a comfortable place to sleep.

"Tomorrow is another day". No matter what the situation may be, come tomorrow there is always a solution. To worry about tomorrow's affairs right now would be pointless.

Guo DaLu yawned, and sauntered into the city's best inn.

He only forgot one thing.

Although an inn's door was always open and it was very easy to walk in, when it comes time to walk out, it gets much harder. If you didn't have any money in your pockets, they will not let you saunter out.

Of course Guo DaLu wouldn't just slip out or bring shame upon himself, so how would he manage?

During this time he became a little worried and paced a few circles around the courtyard. Suddenly he spotted a red strip of paper attached to a wall that said: "Urgently hiring chefs."

So Guo DaLu became a chef.

With the escort job, from start to finish, he still managed to last half a month.

As a chef he lasted three days.

During those three days, he used up more than twenty catties of oil, dropped more than thirty bowls, and broke more than forty plates.

The only reason they were patient with him, was because the dishes Guo DaLu prepared were actually quite decent. Sometimes finding a good chef was much harder than finding a good wife, but when Guo DaLu dropped a pan of sweet and sour fish on a customer's face they just couldn't take it anymore.

That customer only criticized his fish as being too bland and asked that he put more salt on it. Guo DaLu's temper flared up and he pointed at the man's nose scolding loudly: "Have you ever eaten sweet and sour fish? Have you ever even

eaten fish? You can't make sweet and sour fish too salty, don't you know that?! ”.

If every chef was that ferocious, would anyone dare come in anymore?

At this point, even if they had allowed him to stay on, he no longer felt like continuing anymore. After three days of being a chef, his only reward was that his entire body had another layer of grease and smoke, and his pockets were still empty.

Of course, Guo DaLu wasn't concerned at all. He was willing to do anything, why should he be worried?

The question was, what should he do?

Guo DaLu started to think and pondered for half a day before suddenly realizing that most of the things he could do required spending money -- riding horses, drinking wine, giving flowers, giving orders. Can these things earn him any money?

Luckily there were still a couple of things that could earn him some money, for example, singing.

When he sang in the past, people usually applauded him. One person even asked him: “Did you learn how to sing in your mother's womb?”.

And someone else said: “With that voice of his and further musical study, if he really decided to become a singer, all the other performers won't have anything to eat.”.

Although Guo DaLu didn't want to take other people's food, his belly started to sing a song of emptiness.

Therefore he went to a restaurant he has never been to before, and prepared to sing.

As soon as he went upstairs, all the waiters immediately surrounded him, laughing with him, pouring tea and handing out towels and asking: "What would Master like to eat today? What would you like to drink? Today's fish was especially delivered here on a fast horse from JiangNan, do you want us to freshly kill one to accompany some thirty year old ShaoXing wine?".

With such a stylish man like Guo DaLu, if the waiters didn't suck up to him, who else would they badger?

Guo DaLu's face reddened as if he's already had the ShaoXing wine, "I'm here to perform songs", how would he even be able to say something like this now?

After a long pause, he finally started to say: "I'm actually looking for someone....." before he finished his sentence, he was quickly shooed downstairs and out the door like he was being chased by whips.

Of course he couldn't blame the waiters, he could only blame himself for not being able to look like a song performer.

"Alas, it seems that if someone looks too good he can also lose out, maybe it'd be better if I were uglier."

Although Guo DaLu was sighing, he had the sudden urge to go look in a mirror.

If he can't sing, what should he do now?

"The Heavens granted me this pair of clever hands, theres gotta be something I can do."

Guo DaLu has always been happy with his pair of hands.

He stared at his strong fingers, and suddenly thought of something that had always been a part of the martial world.

“Yes, I’ll sell my skill on the streets, with my martial arts who wouldn’t be able to appreciate it?”.

Guo DaLu was so happy he even forgot about the hunger in his belly, and wondered why he didn’t think of this great idea two days ago.

Although the sky was dark, the streets were still very crowded.

Guo DaLu picked the busiest corner, and prepared to perform.

But before starting, it felt like he should first give some kind of introductory speech.

What should he say?

Guo DaLu didn’t have any problems talking when he shouldn’t, but when it came time for him to say something, he couldn’t come up with anything.

“It’s not big deal if I don’t say anything, besides people will be coming to see me perform not listen to me talk; Just as soon as I reveal my skills theres no doubt that people will start crowding around to watch.”.

So Guo DaLu pulled back his sleeves, tucked in his shirt, and started performing his flashiest fist techniques.

When he punched, his fists looked like wild tigers leaping from the forest. His kicks were like dragons entering the sea. Images of his fists flew everywhere, the force of their wind

whoosed in the air. Naturally, every move was a display of true kung fu.

But not only did people not crowd around, they moved far, far away. Even some of the more courageous people, only dared to stand behind the corner of a building and sneaked peeks.

“That person on the street started swinging his fists for no reason, what’s his problem?”.

At first, Guo DaLu still thought everything was cool, but then he gradually realized that something was not right.

Luckily he caught on to this quickly.

“What I’m displaying is true kung fu, no fancy stuff. Of course these ordinary people can’t appreciate that. Fine, I’ll just show them something startling to get their attention.”.

After realizing this point, Guo DaLu suddenly spun his body around and “BANG!”, with one punch he smashed a big hole in the wall behind him. “BANG!”, with one foot he kicked down a stone pillar they use to tie horses to -- of course, his pants ripped while he was doing this.

With screams of terror, everyone on the streets scattered. A few shops even locked their doors, all because of this lunatic out on the street who must have taken the wrong medicine. So this was the result of Guo DaLu’s attempt at showcasing his martial arts talent, all the time he spent practising his fists and displaying his earth-moving strength and all he ended up with was some ripped trousers.

Why wasn’t his story as interesting as those soul-stirring heroes?

Can't be helped, there are many things in this world that sound great when you listen to them, but isn't so great when you're experiencing them.

That evening, Guo DaLu had no choice but be hungry and slept on an altar in a run-down temple.

Of course, he could have gone and eat at the best restaurants and sleep at the best inns and worry about the consequences later, but although our hero is a bit dense, he was not a scoundrel. Even if he died, he wouldn't do anything disgraceful.

"Even if I need to steal, I'll be a famous bandit, not some small-time chicken or dog thief."

During afternoon of the following day, Guo DaLo suddenly decided on becoming a bandit.

He didn't know where this decision came from -- probably from a stomach that was fast becoming worn out.

"Being a bandit isn't too bad, there were a lot of righteous bandits who rob the rich to help the poor, weren't their stories passed down across time within the martial world?"

Therefore Guo DaLu decided to become a bandit, a righteous big-time bandit of course.

This time he was determined to succeed and not fail.

"To do something well, one must have a good plan before starting."

To become a thief, what should he need to consider?

Number one, he needed to find the right house to rob of course, the owner needs to be a very wealthy person, as well

as someone who is ruthless in obtaining wealth. If it was a corrupt government official, that would be even better.

If you take money from this kind of person, others will not only not blame you, they'd actually clap and cheer for you.

Guo DaLu got alert, and started to look around in all directions. After searching for a long time, he finally found the right house.

It was situated on a mountainside, it was very large and extravagant.

That meant the owner must be very wealthy.

The house was very far from the urban areas, it was very isolated and remote. You can almost say it was in the wilderness, it's closest neighbor was a cemetery.

This meant the owner must not be an honest and upright person, honest people don't live in places like that.

It all matched his criteria perfectly, now all he needed to do was wait for the perfect time to strike.

The perfect time was naturally during the night.

But Guo DaLu couldn't wait that long, at dusk he rushed into the house.

The first thing he laid eyes on was a bed.

The bed was huge and very, very comfortable.

On the bed laid a man.

Other than this, he didn't see anything else.

This house was very large, it was constructed magnificently. From end to end, it must have had at least thirty rooms, the biggest one could hold more than ten tables of liquor.

But all the many rooms in the house were empty, even the kitchen was empty.

Guo DaLu paused.

The man lying on the bed wasn't sleeping, his eyes were wide open this whole time, but even though Guo DaLu had been running back and forth searching the place, this man completely ignored him.

Finally, Guo DaLu couldn't help but rush up to the bed to ask him what was going on.

This man actually asked first: "Have you found anything of worth yet?".

Guo DaLu could only shake his head.

This person sighed and said: "I already knew you wouldn't find anything, I've already searched for three days, even the last rusty saucepan has been taken by me to exchange for some biscuits. If you could still find something, your talent must not be small."

He wasn't bad looking, just a bit emaciated, it appeared as if he barely had enough strength to speak and definitely looked like a person who has been starving for several days.

But the bed he was lying on was actually a good bed in every sense.

How can this empty house still have this kind of a good bed? Why was this person resting on this bed?

Guo DaLu suddenly asked: “What kind of place is this actually?”.

This person said: “Regarding this manor’s master, he really is very famous.”.

Guo DaLu: “Famous? How so?”.

The man: “Have you ever heard the name of Wealthy Manor? This place is Wealthy Manor.”.

Guo DaLu abruptly called out: “Wealthy Manor? This desolate place is actually called Wealthy Manor?”.

The man: “That’s absolutely correct. If a fat man can become very thin, Wealthy Manor can also become very poor, what is so strange about that?”.

Guo DaLu: “Then what kind of person are you? What are you doing in this ghostly place?”.

The man cleared his throat and said: “If I don’t stay here then where should I stay? I am the seventh generation master of Wealthy Manor.”.

Guo DaLu paused again.

The man’s eyes had been riveted to Guo DaLu’s sword this whole time, and suddenly said: “This sword of yours appears to be well crafted.”.

Guo DaLu: “It is well crafted.”.

The man: “It looks like it should be worth a bit of money.”.

Guo DaLu called out: “A bit? Do you know how to judge quality or not?”.

After a while, he sighed: "You're telling me to go pawn my sword and buy some food and wine for you to eat?".

The man laughed: "You finally understand."

Guo DaLu: "Do you realize what I've come here to do?".

The man: "Of course, you're here to steal money."

Guo DaLu stared at him: "You know I'm a thief, but you still want to take advantage of me?".

The man laughed: "Although you're a thief, I'm just a poor ghost. When a thief encounters a poor ghost, he can only resign himself to having bad luck.". Guo DaLu looked at him, and suddenly realized that this person's laughter was very charming.

He couldn't help but laugh as well: "Even if you want to take advantage of me, the least you could do is take my sword, pawn it, and buy some food and wine yourself to bring back for me to eat."

The man said: "If you're going to do a good deed, you might as well do it to the end. It's best if you take the trip."

Guo DaLu: "What about you? You're too lazy to even move?".

The man sighed: "Think about it, if I weren't lazy how could I have become this poor?".

Guo DaLu paused for the third time. He had truly never seen anyone like this before, he didn't have any means of dealing with this type of person.

He really did go exchange his sword for some food and wine and returned.

After putting a duck leg and half a catty of wine in his belly, the man finally sat up on the bed and smiled: "I'm drinking your wine, and I don't even know your name."

Guo DaLu said: "I'm called Guo DaLu, the 'da' in straightforward, the 'lu' in road."

The man said: "DaLu -- you are really worthy of your name, you really are very straightforward."

Guo DaLu: "And you? What's your name?"

The man: "I'm called Wang Dong. The 'wang' in king, the 'dong' in motion like rabbit."

Guo DaLu looked at him, and after looking for a long time he suddenly laughed loudly: "I think you should really be called Wang BuDong. [*BuDong means motionless.]".

Only a dead man could be completely motionless.

Although Wang Dong wasn't a dead man, he didn't move much more than one.

Before reaching the critical point, he will not move.

When he doesn't want to move, nobody can make him move.

If a pitcher fell in front of someone's face, everyone would reach out to grab it, but Wang Dong would still not move. If a precious treasure suddenly fell from the sky, no matter who they are they would pick it up, but Wang Dong would still not move. Even if the world's most beautiful woman stripped naked and sat on his lap, he still wouldn't move.

But there were times when he did move, in fact when he did it was a startling thing. One time he flipped 382 somersaults nonstop just to permit a little child whose mother recently died to smile a bit.

One time he traveled 1450 li for over 2 days and 2 nights just to see an old friend for the last time.

His friend had already died earlier.

One time in the space of 3 days and 3 nights, he fought with 274 men, killing 103 of them because they were bandits who killed Zhao family village's Old Man Zhao and kidnapped his three daughters.

He didn't even know Old Man Zhao or his three daughters.

If someone bullied him, or even spat in his face, he would still not move. If you said he was strange, well, he really was a little strange.

If you said he was lazy, he was surprisingly lazy, ridiculously lazy.

And now, he unexpectedly became friends with Guo DaLu. Putting two characters like them together, if they weren't poor who would be poor?

Although they were poor, they were still happy.

Because they have never wronged another person, and never wronged themselves.

Because they did not resent the Heavens, nor make grief for others. No matter how many hardships they encountered, no matter how many setbacks, it would never get their spirits down. They do not fear experiencing difficulties, but rather, they understood the exhilaration of overcoming them.

Even if they failed, they would not be discouraged much less lose heart.

Because they understood how valuable life was, and also understood how to enjoy it.

Therefore their lives will always be colorful. They did many things that were unexpected, maybe you might think the things they did were very stupid or very funny.

But you can't deny that the things they did were things that nobody else could do.

Not even you. Therefore I believe you will certainly enjoy listening to their story.

End of Prologue I

Prologue II - Yan Qi and Ma Yi

With two people like Guo DaLu and Wang Dong, their deeds should already be enough to hold people's interest for a long time, how can one also add in Yan Qi?

Yan Qi's deeds alone are already more colorful than 300 other men combined, how can one also add in Guo DaLu? Also add in Wang Dong?

But Old Man Heaven still insisted that the three of them get together. How will this ever do?

Guo DaLu and Wang Dong weren't poor every day. There were times when they had money, but nobody knows when these moments occurred, nor did they know where their money came from.

Even they didn't know.

Their money always came unexpectedly, even they were a little mystified.

Perhaps this was because the way they spent money was the same.

Autumn was fast approaching, the trees in the courtyard behind Wealthy Manor suddenly contained large and sweet pears that could be plucked down and fill several baskets, which could be sold for twenty to thirty liang.

As soon as the pears had started ripening, people would come and inquire about the price, and even picked the fruits themselves. [*I thought their manor was in "No-Man's Land", ah well, best not to think too much when it comes to GL

stories...] From start to finish, they didn't need to spend any effort nor help anyone out.

It was just as if this money fell from the skies, so of course one had to go celebrate.

In order to celebrate, you can't do without wine. If you have wine, you also can't do without meat.

"Comes into favor, gamble it all away, left with nothing", only "eating" is the most rewarding, this was Wong Dang's rule to live by and also his greatest enjoyment.

In the beginning, he would eat lying down. After eating until he was happy, he would sit up. But when he got tired again, he would lie back down and continue eating.

Therefore his bed was simply greasier than a kitchen table, no matter which area you touched with your hand, you would brush up against one or two pieces of leftover meat, three or four unfinished pieces of bone.

Although Guo DaLu was never one to be too picky about cleanliness, he would rather sleep on the floor, than dare to lie on this bed.

Wang Dong was happy his belly could enjoy this bed, this bed was not only a place for him to sleep, it was also his living room, his garden, and his dining table.

The strangest thing was, he could lie on this bed and drink wine. First he faced the wine jug towards his lips, and then "GULP, GULP" he drank it down, not spilling a single drop of wine.

Guo DaLu admired this very much and also wanted to learn it himself, but he had some doubts and couldn't help but ask: "You can still drink wine while lying down?".

Wang Dong said: "Of course you can drink it."

Guo DaLu said: "Wouldn't it spill out your nose?"

Wang Dong: "Of course not, even if I drank hanging upside down it still wouldn't come out the nose."

Guo DaLu: "How do you know?"

Wang Dong: "I've tried it."

Guo DaLu laughed: "You're too lazy to even sit up, how did you manage to dangle yourself?"

Wang Dong: "If you don't believe me, why don't you try it yourself?"

So Guo DaLu got himself upside down, and then brought the wine jug up to his lips slowly drinking it gulp by gulp. By the second mouthful, wine started to spurt out his nose.

It was at this time, that he saw Yan Qi -- well, the first thing he saw was Yan Qi's legs.

Yan Qi's legs wasn't much different than anyone else's, but the boots he wore were very special indeed.

His boots were made of leather, the craftsmanship superb. There was a flower pattern on top, and it could compare with any boots that a prince might wear.

This wasn't anything strange.

The strange part was, these boots had everything except the soles.

The clothes he wore were originally very fine and well suited, but now it was ripped to shreds, there wasn't a single

area that was neat.

Only the hat he wore on his head, can still be seen as attractive.

His person was not very tall, but his arms and legs were long.

His face was very refined, almost like a young woman's. Large eyes, a small mouth. When smiling two dimples can be seen, but when not smiling his face would become very cold, turning a bit pale-green, causing others to feel somewhat afraid of approaching him.

His clothes seemed like it used to be a light green color, but now there were traces of red and yellow.

The yellow was obviously from the dirt, but what was the red?

Could it be blood?

Two people happily drinking wine at home and suddenly seeing someone like this charge in would be startled no matter who they were.

But as for Guo DaLo and Wang Dong, one was still sprawled, the other still hanging. It's as if they haven't even noticed this person.

If you entered a room, and saw someone lying on a bed drinking wine, and another hanging upside down drinking wine, I'm afraid you'd think you just entered a mental institute; even if you didn't run away in fright, you'd start getting goosebumps.

But this person didn't seem to find it scary at all, as if drinking wine hanging upside down was a very normal affair

and doing it sitting down should be the strange thing.

This person was Yan Qi.

Guo DaLo's legs were hanging on a crossbeam.

Yan Qi suddenly flipped a somersault, and hung two legs on top of the crossbeam, his face turned towards Guo DaLo's face as if he was going to say something.

But he didn't say a single word.

Guo DaLo began to think that this person was interesting, and suddenly squinted his eyes and made an ugly face.

Yan Qi also squinted his eyes, and made an ugly face.

Guo DaLo said: "How are you?".

Yan Qi said: "Good.".

Guo DaLo shifted his eyes and said: "Want some wine?".

Yan Qi: "Good.".

Guo DaLo immediately passed the wine jug over, he purposely wanted to see what it would look like to have wine going into his nose.

Who knew that this person's skill was much better than his, "GULP, GULP", with one swallow he drank down more than half the wine in the jug, and not a single drop leaked out.

Guo DaLo watched until his eyes widened: "You drank wine like this before?".

Yan Qi: "A few times.".

He suddenly laughed and continued: "I wanted to try and see if it was possible to drink wine like this."

If a person has tried to do something like this, there must be very few things he hasn't done.

Guo DaLo suddenly laughed: "What else have you tried to do?"

Yan Qi said: "Anything that you can speak of, I have pretty much tried already."

Guo DaLo smiled: "There can't be many other things in this world as hard to take as drinking wine upside down, is there?"

Yan Qi: "Theres still are a few."

Guo DaLo: "Still? Then what would be the most uncomfortable thing there is?"

Yan Qi: "The most uncomfortable thing is letting yourself be nailed inside a coffin, and buried underground."

Guo DaLo stared even harder: "You've tried doing this before?"

Yan Qi: "I haven't tried this very often, maybe around two times."

Guo DaLo suddenly somersaulted down and stared at him.

Yan Qi's face didn't show any reaction.

After a long time, Guo DaLo sighed and said: "If you're not the King of Boastfulness, then you must be a weirdo."

Wang Dong suddenly said: "He is a weirdo."

Yan Qi laughed: "Touche, touche."

Guo DaLo clapped his hand and laughed heartily: "That's right, that's right. Everyone here is a weirdo, otherwise we also could not arrive here."

He continued: "The first time I showed up here, was to be a robber. What about you?"

Yan Qi said: "I don't want to become a robber, because I'm already a robber."

Guo DaLo looked him up and down a few times, and abruptly laughed: "A robber that looks like you, must be a stupid robber."

Yan Qi: "Not stupid, just ran into some bad luck."

Guo DaLo: "Ran into some bad luck?"

Yan Qi sighed: "If not for running into bad luck, why would I rush to this place?"

Guo DaLo: "That's right, what did you originally come to do here?"

Yan Qi: "I don't want to do anything, just wanted to find a place to hide out."

Guo DaLo: "Why do you need to hide?"

Yan Qi: "Because once again theres somebody who wants to nail me inside a coffin and bury me underground."

Guo DaLo: "Who is it this time?"

Yan Qi: "Ma Yi [*The Ant]."

Guo DaLu's mouth gaped so wide his chin almost fell off and said: "What.....what did you say?".

Yan Qi: "I said Ma Yi."

Guo DaLu: "Ma Yi?.....".

He suddenly laughed until he was bent over and panted for breath: "If you're even afraid of an ant, you must be very couragous."

Yan Qi sighed and shook his head: "Looks like you've never mingled in the martial world, you unexpectedly don't even know what 'Ma Yi' is."

Guo DaLu: "Since I was three, I've known what an ant was."

Yan Qi: "What is it?".

Guo DaLu: "It is very, very tiny. An insect that crawls all over the ground. Wang Dong's bed has quite a few, I can catch some for you to look at any time."

Yan Qi: "I'm not talking about that kind of Ma Yi, I'm talking about a person."

Guo DaLu paused: "A person? An ant is a person?".

Yan Qi: "It's four people. These four people are the Ant Lords, they also have many 'ants' under their command."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?".

Yan Qi: "These four people, one is called Golden Ant, one is called Silver Ant, one is called Red Ant, one is called White Ant."

Guo DaLu couldn't help laughing: "If theres already a red ant and a white ant, then there really needs to be a black

ant.”.

Yan Qi: “There used to be one, but now he’s already dead.”.

Guo DaLu blinked his eyes and said: “Since they’re obviously men, why are they called Ants?”.

Yan Qi: “Many people have nicknames.”.

Guo DaLu: “Even if one adopts a nickname, he should choose a more prestigious name, such as “Winged Tiger” or “Golden-Maned Lion” or almost any other name will do, why pick a tiny ant?”.

Yan Qi: “Because they are very short, all of them are dwarves.”.

The more Guo DaLu listened, the more ridiculous it sounded, and he couldn’t help laughing again: “What’s so scary about dwarves?”.

Yan Qi: “Not only are these dwarves scary, they are extremely frightening, I’m afraid there are not many in this world who are more fearful than them.”.

Guo DaLu: “Oh? Could it be that their skills are very great?”.

Yan Qi: “Each of them has a very special kung fu, even E Mei Sect’s number one fighter died at their hands.”.

Guo DaLu: “Since they are this fearful, why do you still go bothering them?”.

Yan Qi sighed and said: “Because recently I’ve become poor, and ran afoul of some bad luck, in the past half month I’ve lost fifteen games, I had to sell the soles of my boots and take the money to pay off some of my gambling debts……”.

Guo DaLu cried out: “What? You said you sold the soles of your boots to repay gambling debts?”.

Yan Qi: “That’s right.”.

Guo DaLu: “How much do you owe?”.

Yan Qi: “Around seven or eight thousand liang.”.

Guo DaLu: “How much did you sell your boot soles for?”.

Yan Qi: “The two boot soles together got me 1300 liang.”.

The more he spoke, the less sense he made. Guo DaLu still wanted to listen to what more he had to say, so he stifled his laughter and said: “Then that still leaves 6700 liang.”.

Yan Qi: “It’s precisely because of this, that I needed to take advantage of others.”.

Guo DaLu: “Since you are a robber, why didn’t you go steal it?”.

Yan Qi: “Do you think a robber like myself would go steal from just anyone?”.

Guo DaLu: “You were still picky?”.

Yan Qi: “Not only picky, but selective to the extreme. If one is not a corrupt official, I would not steal from him. If one is not a shady merchant, I would also not steal from him. If one is not a robber, I also would not steal from him. I will not steal if the target is not right, or if the location is not right.”.

Guo DaLu: “So a robber like you would steal from other robbers?”.

Yan Qi: “That’s right, this is called black eating black.”.

Guo DaLu: "Therefore, you decided to go take advantage of those Ants."

Yan Qi: "That's right, I happened to know they did some big transactions during those several days, so I went and asked to borrow 10000 liang."

Guo DaLu: "Did they agree to this?"

Yan Qi: "Agreed to, yes, but there was a condition."

Guo DaLu: "What kind of condition?"

Yan Qi: "They wanted me to sleep in a coffin, and be buried underground for two days to see if I would eventually die or not."

Guo DaLu: "But you've done this sort of thing before."

Yan Qi: "Although I've done it before, it was still not something I'd enjoy tasting again."

Guo DaLu: "Therefore you did not agree."

Yan Qi: "I agreed, because any debt can be owed, but a gambling debt cannot be owed."

Guo DaLu: "You promised them but didn't follow through, is that why they are chasing you?"

Yan Qi: "That's absolutely correct."

Guo DaLu: "What is your name?"

Yan Qi: "Yan Qi."

Guo DaLu: "You have six brothers and sisters [*Qi means seven]?"

Yan Qi: “No.”.

Guo DaLu: “Since you aren’t the seventh child, why are you called Yan Qi?”.

Yan Qi: “Because I have already died seven times.”.

Guo DaLu: “If you die one more time, then would you need to be called Yan Ba [*Ba means eight obviously]?”.

Yan Qi laughed: “Yan Qi is a good name, I don’t want to change it anymore.”.

Guo DaLu suddenly doubled over, laughing loudly, laughing so hard tears came out of his eyes, and pointed at Yan Qi saying: “You’re not a weirdo, you’re the King of B.S. in every sense of the term.”.

Yan Qi: “You don’t believe what I’m saying?”.

Guo DaLu: “Not a single word, even a three year old child wouldn't believe what you’re saying.”.

Yan Qi sighed: “I originally didn’t plan on speaking the truth, I’ve always known that it was much easier to make people believe lies than the truth.”.

Guo DaLu laughed: “If you were speaking the truth, I would crawl on the ground and.....”.

Suddenly someone said: “Then crawl.”.

This voice was sharp and high pitched, although not loud it caused one’s earlobes to ring.

Guo DaLu lifted his head, and saw a person.

The person was standing on the window sill, but still wasn’t as tall as the window.

On his body was a set of glistening golden clothes, if his face didn't have a beard and the corners of his eyes didn't have wrinkles, anyone would think that he was a five or six year old child.

Guo DaLu paused for a moment, and then exhaled slowly: "So you're Golden Ant?"

Golden Ant said: "That's right, therefore I can testify that everything he said was true and not a single word false."

Guo DaLu sighed again and said with a bitter smile: "Since Golden Ant has arrived, where is Silver Ant?"

Before the sentence was finished, another person appeared on the window. Although this person was a bit taller than Golden Ant, at most he was only taller by two or three inches.

On his body was a set of sparkling silver clothes, his face was wearing a silver mask that looked like some kind of terrifying spirit creature.

Even Guo DaLu felt a bit creeped out, and muttered: "I guess Red Ant will be wearing red clothes."

Only to hear someone laugh seductively: "You guessed right."

The laughter was very charming, no matter who you were you don't get to hear such a nice sounding laugh very often. As soon as you hear this laughter, you'd imagine that the person laughing must be very attractive.

Red Ant was really very attractive.

A dwarf's body wouldn't normally be very symmetrical, but she was an exception.

She was wearing skin tight red clothes, the areas that should be slender were not thick, the areas that should be fat were not thin. She had a nice oval face, her eyebrows were like wispy distant mountains, her eyes like clear spring water, and her smile was sweet.

Guo DaLu couldn't help looking at her.

That pair of spring water eyes were also staring at Guo DaLu and she laughed charmingly: "Those eyes of yours don't look very honest."

Guo DaLu sighed: "I am originally not an honest person, from head to toe there isn't an honest spot."

Red Ant laughed: "Haha, could it be that you're a pervert?"

Guo DaLu: "Not entirely accurate but close, it's only a pity.....".

The smile on Red Ant's face suddenly disappeared: "Only a pity what?"

Guo DaLu: "It's only a pity I can't shrink myself, otherwise I wouldn't mind becoming a Yellow Ant."

Red Ant bit her lips, the corners again revealing a sweet smile: "You dare to flirt with me, your courage is really not small, aren't you afraid my husband will be jealous?"

Guo DaLu: "Who is your husband? White Ant?I hear white ants can fly."

Red Ant laughed tenderly: "You've guessed correctly again, you're really talented."

The laughter sounded like silver chimes, and in the midst of it something flew in from outside the window.”.

This thing wouldn't seem like a person in anyone's eyes, lightly whirling around like a piece of fluffy cloud or a piece of white snowflake. Lightly floating about and then flying up and suddenly whooshing right by the top of Guo DaLu's head.

Guo DaLu only sensed something cold near the top of his head, if he hadn't evaded quickly, his head would probably have been the thing that was moved.

With another whooshing sound, that thing flew by again.

Of course this couldn't be a person, a person wouldn't have this kind of fearsome hing gung.

But it actually was a person, a person wearing snow white clothes, the sleeves were wide and long like a pair of wings, he was thin and short, no taller than three and a half feet, no wider than a foot, if you were to place him on a scale he wouldn't be much heavier than a rabbit.

If one weren't this type of person, how would one be able to learn this kind of hing gung?

Guo DaLu sighed again and muttered: “The White Ant actually is able to fly.”.

Yan Qi said: “White Ant's hing gung is number one in the world, Red Ant's entire body is filled with hidden weapons, Golden Ant can break fists and swords, Silver Ant cannot be penetrated by sabres or spears. I already said earlier, each of them has a very special kung fu, and now, you should finally believe me.”.

Guo DaLu smiled bitterly: “Do you want me to crawl now, or wait until later?”.

White Ant said coldly: “It’s best that you crawl now, crawl outside and spare yourself from being carried outside.”.

Red Ant giggled: “You see, I told you he’d be jealous, now you should believe it.”.

Gold Ant said: “Our business does not concern you, it is really best that you crawl out.”.

Guo DaLu: “I can’t crawl, it is best that you first teach me how.”.

Red Ant laughed: “It seems like bringing one coffin was not enough, we should have brought three.”.

Guo DaLu: “You guys even brought a coffin? You really want to shut him inside a coffin?”.

Golden Ant: “I had already said, every word he spoke was not false.”.

Yan Qi suddenly patted Guo DaLu on the shoulders and smiled: “This is a problem I created, no need for you to play the hero and manage this affair.”.

Red Ant laughed: “That’s right, besides you’ve already died seven times, what’s the big deal in dying once more.”.

Yan Qi said: “This is another person’s house, if I must die I still can’t die here.”.

White Ant: “Then step outside.”.

Yan Qi brushed his clothes and smiled: “Fine, outside then.....guys, if I don’t die this time I will be sure to come back and drink with you.”.

Wang Dong had been lying on his bed this entire time not moving at all, now he suddenly spoke: "Wait a moment."

Golden Ant: "Wait for what?"

Wang Dong: "Do you realize what this place is?"

Red Ant giggled: "I know, this is your pig sty."

Wang Dong: "If this is a pig sty, I am the pig king. No matter who comes here, they must listen to me."

Golden Ant angrily said: "What do you want?"

Wang Dong: "I want Yan Qi to stay and drink with me, finding someone else who could drink upside down with me is not easy, how can I allow him to sleep in a coffin?"

Guo DaLu laughed: "You want to move now?"

Wang Dong: "These little ants bite, I have no choice but to move."

Guo DaLu: "How will you move?"

Wang Dong: "Red Ant is mine, White Ant is all yours."

Wang Dong is motionless, but when he does move it is amazing.

Before his sentence was finished, his entire person had suddenly shot up from the bed and threw himself into the fray.

Not only did he throw himself, his blanket followed him as well.

He targeted Red Ant.

Red Ant couldn't even see him, she only saw a black cotton blanket curling towards her.

With a twist of her body, three or four different kinds of hidden weapons flew out, some were fast and quick, others were spinning and turning.

Because she was a small person, her hidden weapons were especially small.

Because her hidden weapons were especially small, it was especially effective at cutting through the air making it especially difficult for others to evade.

But she forgot one thing, a cotton blanket was not a person.

A cotton blanket cannot die.

Although her hidden weapons were ingenious, her techniques exquisite, it was not of any use at all.

One heard consecutive sounds of "PU, PU, PU" as 30 or 40 hidden weapons all struck the blanket, a blanket that was covered with pork grease, duck grease, chicken grease, and sesame oil.

It was like the blanket was simply soaked in grease, soaked to the point where it was slippery and resilient, even a bow or a crossbow may not be able to shoot through it, much less these tiny hidden weapons.

By the time Red Ant realized she was tricked, she started to retreat but the blanket had already approached like a cloud of ravens.

Wang Dong is motionless, but when he does move nobody could imagine it would be this fast.

Red Ant suddenly got a whiff of some peculiar oily odor, and then her entire body was wrapped up by the blanket.

If she was a little taller, Wang Dong might not have been able to wrap her up in the blanket. But she was really tiny, Wang Dong reached around with his two hands and just like a dumpling, she was wrapped up in the middle of the bundle.

Before Wang Dong was finished, he heard the sound of the wind moving behind him, White Ant was already flying over. Even if Wang Dong moved any faster, he would still not be as fast as this flying White Ant.

In the blink of an eye, White Ant had caught up to him.

But Wang Dong wanted White Ant to catch up to him, because he knew that he wouldn't have been able to catch up to White Ant.

As soon as White Ant reached him, he suddenly stopped, turned, and swung the blanket around. Within the blanket was his own wife, White Ant naturally had no choice but to catch it. This blanket was bigger than he was, and twice as heavy, as soon as he reached out and caught it, he immediately fell down. Wang Dong arrived behind him and easily sealed his acupoints.

The muscles on White Ant's little face was twisted in anger, he stared hard at Wang Dong, eyes looking like they were going to bulge out.

Wang Dong was motionless again, and lazily smiled: "You're not satisfied with this defeat, are you? Because I didn't use real kung fu. I tell you this, if I used real kung fu it wouldn't be considered as skillful. I never use real kung fu when I fight.

White Ant was so mad he simply had to spit blood. Wang Dong really appeared as if he didn't know any real kung fu, everything seemed to be the result of cleverness and opportunity.

But if one didn't have first-class kung fu, how can one have that kind of opportunity? How can the timing be so precise? How can the actions be so steady? Not only must the hands and feet contain real kung fu, the brain must also contain real kung fu.

Wang Dong was motionless, but when he does it's the real deal.

Looking back at Golden Ant, Guo DaLu's fist wind had already forced him into a state where he could hardly breathe.

Yan Qi was fighting with Silver Ant.

Although Silver Ant was slightly larger than the rest and practiced hard kung-fu, once his kung fu gets hard, his hands and feet gets slower.

The faster Yan Qi moved around him, the slower he became.

Suddenly, Yan Qi took off his hat and slammed it onto Silver Ant's head. The hat was big, the head was small, with his entire head covered up he wasn't able to see anything.

Yan Qi reached out with his leg and tripped him. There was a loud "HUA LA LA" sound. It seems like Silver Ant was wearing silver armor, once he fell down it was not easy for him to crawl back up.

He wanted to rip off the hat on his head, but he was pressed down by something very heavy. Apparently Yan Qi had

planted his butt and sat down on him. Yan Qi laughed happily: "This bench is not bad, too bad it's a little small."

And what about Golden Ant? He was already having a hard time breathing, and now that he became more anxious he grabbed his stomach, and without any action on Guo DaLu's part, he fainted, white froth spilling from the corners of his mouth.

Guo DaLu sighed: "Seems like this person had some kind of rabid sickness, looks like I went after the wrong person."

Wang Dong said: "I actually said that White Ant was all yours, didn't you hear?"

Guo DaLu laughed: "You say your thing, I go after my thing, I wasn't able to catch up to White Ant and he was also set on chasing you, so I took on this Golden Ant. No matter what, my physique was bigger than his so of course my strength and stamina wouldn't be any less than his. Based on that, I was sure to eat him up."

Wang Dong also sighed and muttered: "I wouldn't have imagined that someone like you would go for the easy pickings."

Guo DaLu: "I also wouldn't have imagined that your blanket could be so useful, in the future if someone wants to learn how to defend against hidden weapons, I would definitely recommend they start eating greasy chicken in bed."

Wang Dong: "Greasy chicken is not enough, you need to eat roast duck as well."

Yan Qi suddenly sighed and said: "What I wouldn't have imagined, is encountered two people like yourselves, perhaps my bad luck has left as well."

Guo DaLu laughed: “This is only because you really are a weirdo, and not the King of B.S.”.

Yan Qi: “The reason you were willing to help me, was because I was being honest?”.

Guo DaLu: “And also because you could drink wine upside down.”.

Yan Qi also laughed: “If I hadn’t seen you drinking upside down, why would I even say anything like that?”.

He suddenly sighed again and said: “Actually I still have a few words to say, but don’t know if I should say them or not.”.

Wang Dong: “Did you want to thank me?”.

Yan Qi sighed: “For something like this, I really don’t know how I should thank you.”.

Wang Dong: “If you really wish to thank me, there is something you can still do.”.

Yan Qi: “What is it?”.

Wang Dong: “Lift me back to my bed, I’m too lazy to move again.”.

Nobody in whose eyes it was, Wealthy Manor would not be regarded as an interesting place. There simply wasn’t a single thing that would cause someone to want to stick around.

The strange thing was, like Guo DaLu, once Yan Qi arrived here he didn’t leave.

It wasn't because they didn't have anywhere else to go, it was because.....

Because of what? Even they weren't quite sure.

Some people are strangely drawn to each other, like iron to a magnet, once they meet they will be captivated by each other. As long as these people are together, they will feel very happy. It didn't matter if they had to sleep on the ground, or go hungry for a time, it wouldn't even matter to them if the sky fell down.

There were very few things in this world that they could not endure, one of those things were tears. A woman's tears, especially the tears of a little woman less than four feet tall.

Although Red Ant was small, but her tears were really not small.

Guo DaLu suddenly discovered that the amount of a woman's tears, was not related to the size of her body at all. Instead, the smaller the woman the more tears there seemed to be.

There were many things with women that were like this. The fatter the person, the less she ate. The uglier the person, the more makeup she puts on. The older the person, the more powder she puts on. The more clothes a person has, the less she wears.

"Alas, women really are a strange breed."

Guo DaLu sighed. Red Ant continued to cry non-stop and it reached a point where he couldn't take it anymore.

So he had to leave.

Yan Qi didn't want him to leave.

Wang Dong had already laid down and fallen asleep, once he falls asleep it wouldn't even matter to him if someone died.

Yan Qi stopped Guo DaLu and said: "If you leave, what will I do with the four people we captured?"

Guo DaLu: "This was originally your problem, not mine."

Yan Qi: "But if you guys hadn't helped me, how could I have captured them? And if I hadn't captured them, how would I have this problem?"

Guo DaLu paused.

Yan Qi was still afraid he hadn't explained it clearly enough, and continued: "If you guys hadn't helped me, I would have been captured by them. At most I would have just died one more time, and then wouldn't have any more problems. But now, I can't kill them, I can't let them go, how shall I manage?"

The more he explained, the more confused Guo DaLu became.

Wang Dong suddenly poked his head out from under the blanket and smiled: "I have a good plan."

Yan Qi relaxed his breath and said: "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

Wang Dong: "Since you don't want to kill them, and you don't want to let them go, how about having them remain here and raising them for the rest of their lives?"

Guo DaLu immediately clapped his hand and laughed: "That's right, a truly excellent idea. Besides, they are so

small they definitely wouldn't need to eat very much."

Red Ant also immediately stopped crying and said: "Every day if I only get to eat two small bowls of tapioca rice, with a little bit of seafood, and some honeyed peaches, that should be enough for me: If there aren't any honeyed peaches, melons will do."

Yan Qi didn't have any expression, he just stood there and mumbled: "Tapioca rice? Seafood? Honeyed peaches?.....This is also not difficult.". He suddenly turned around, dropped his head and started to walk out.

Guo DaLu: "Where are you going?"

Yan Qi: "To find that coffin and lie down in it, and also find someone to bury it, at least it'll still be much easier than looking for tapioca and honeyed peaches every day."

Guo DaLu sighed and said: "Seeing as how things are, in order to rescue you, it would be best to let them go, at least it'll also be much easier than looking for someone else who can drink wine upside down."

As his lips were talking, his hands were untying the Ants' acupoints.

They were fast in coming, and also not slow in leaving. The three watched them leave, and then suddenly turned and looked at each other.

Guo DaLu: "You were already planning on let them go, weren't you?"

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "But you didn't feel comfortable coming right out and saying it, because we also had a part in it, you were

worried that we might not be satisfied if you just let them go, but in fact.....”.

Yan Qi: “But in fact you also wanted to let them go, right?”.

The three of them looked at each other and suddenly they all erupted in laughter together.

Guo DaLu smiled: “It seems like not only is letting people go easier than killing them, it is also much more pleasant.”.

Yan Qi: “That’s absolutely right, if we killed them we wouldn’t be this happy right now.”.

Wang Dong: “But after we let them go, if they go and harm others, then that would not be so pleasant.”.

Guo DaLu shook his head, and loudly interrupted: “Definitely not, I don’t feel that they are entirely evil, even if they didn’t do very good things in the past, I think they will change for the better in the future.”.He suddenly winked and lowered his voice: “Even if they were really bad, after listening to this speech of mine, they would feel too ashamed to do any more evil deeds.”.

Yan Qi said: “Do you think they heard you?”.

Wang Dong: “Of course they heard him, even a deaf person ten li away could hear this voice of his.”.

Guo DaLu laughed: “That’s right, my voice has always been decent. In the past, there were even many people who said I was born with a golden throat, wait until I’m in the mood and I’ll sing a few songs for you guys to listen to.”.

Wang Dong sighed: “If you must sing, at least wait until I’m asleep before starting.”.

He covered his head with his blanket again and said: "As long as I'm asleep, even if you step on a chicken's neck I still wouldn't wake up."

They were all this kind of people, the way they handled things were very unique. They did things very correctly, and sometimes they would do things wrong.

But, no matter what, the things they did would never involve bloodshed nor make others feel disgusted. The things they did would not only make themselves happy, they would also make others happy.

End of Prologue II

Prologue III - Lin TaiPing

Each month, Yan Qi slips out by himself two or three times. Nobody knew where he went, nor what he went to do.

Each time he returned, he would always bring a few strange things back.

The things he brought back could be a pair of new socks, or an embroidered handkerchief, or it could be some roast pork, or some rice wine.

Sometimes he would bring back a cat, or a canary, or a couple of live fish.

But no matter what, they were not as strange as what he brought back this time.

This time he unexpectedly brought back a person.

A live person.

This person was called Lin TaiPing, but after he came, not a single person's day went by peacefully. [*TaiPing means peaceful.]

Some people like Winter, because during Winter you can enjoy snow, you can enjoy plums, you can eat hot roasted meals in pots, you can snuggle under a warm blanket and read a forbidden book, and you can get a good sleep.

These few simple pleasures are all things you don't get to experience during the other seasons.

Of course the people who enjoy Winter cannot be poor, Wintertime is the most fearful time for poor people, all poor people hope that Winter will be delayed, or better yet not come at all.

Unfortunately, the poor person's Winter always seems inclined to come especially early.

Right now it is Wintertime.

The snow in Wealthy Manor's courtyard is just as white as anywhere else, there were even some plum blossoms in the trees. But if a person was still wearing his flimsy Spring clothes, and if his belly was still filled with yesterday's noodles, the only thing he would be in the mood for was to swallow something to stuff his stomach with, not white snow or plum blossoms.

Guo DaLu looked at the white snow and plum blossoms in the courtyard, and mumbled: "If those plum blossoms were hot peppers, then that would be nice."

Wang Dong: "What's so nice about that?"

Guo DaLu: "Look, the snow covering the ground looks like flour, coupled with a few red peppers, and you'd have a nice bowl of spicy hot noodle soup."

Wang Dong sighed: "You are really uncultured, if Lin Bu heard what you said he'd die from irritation."

Guo DaLu: "Who is Lin Bu?"

Wang Dong: "You've never even heard of Lin Bu?"

Guo DaLu: "I've heard of jerky [*Rou Fu], no matter if it's pork jerky, beef jerky, or deer jerky, they'd all go well with wine."

Wang Dong: “Lin Bu was Lin JunFu and was also known as Lin HuoJing. He was a hermit during the Song Dynasty who lived in the mountains of West Lake. It was said that he didn’t leave the mountain for twenty years and the only things he did were plant plum blossoms and raise cranes, his nickname was ‘Plum-Consort Crane-Child’;

A few of his stanzas regarding plums like ‘the wispy shadow hangs across the clear shallow waters, it’s hidden fragrance drifts across the yellow moon at twilight’ have been recited throughout the ages.”.

Guo DaLu said thoughtfully: “From what you’ve said, this Mr. Lin must be a very venerable person.”.

Wang Dong: “Very venerable indeed.”.

Guo DaLu: “But if his stomach was as hungry as mine, would he still be this wise?”.

Wang Dong thought for a moment and suddenly laughed: “If he was in the same condition as you are now, he probably would be more vulgar and uncultured than you.”.

Guo DaLu also laughed.

He suddenly realized that no matter how cold or hungry a person was, a laugh can make one feel much more comfortable.

At this moment, Wang Dong suddenly jumped up from his bed and said loudly: “Speaking of Lin Bu, I just thought of something.”.

If something can cause Wang Dong to jump up from his bed, it cannot be a small matter.

Guo DaLu couldn't help asking: "What did you think of? Do you also want to take a plum blossom as your wife?".

Wang Dong: "This plum blossom of mine is even better than a wife, it's the wine.....".

Guo DaLu's chin dropped down and he mumbled: "Wine? Wheres the wine coming from?".

Wang Dong: "It's underneath the plum blossoms.".

Guo DaLu forced a laugh: "Regarding a plum blossom as your wife is crazy enough, I can't believe this guy is even crazier.".

But there actually was wine buried underneath the plum tree.

Wang Dong said: "This was something I buried more than ten years ago, that year I heard Lin HuoJing's story and became fond of plum blossoms, so I buried some wine underneath the plum tree to enhance the fragrance of the plum blossoms.".

No matter where you buried a case of wine, if it had been buried for more than ten years then it would definitely be very fragrant.

Guo DaLu broke off the clay seal, closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and sighed: "This isn't mere fragrance, it's the breath of angels.".

Wang Dong smiled: "You should feel grateful to Mr.Lin right now, if it weren't for him I wouldn't have buried this wine; And if it weren't for him I wouldn't have just thought of this wine.".

Guo DaLu no longer had the energy to speak, when there's wine to drink his lips won't do anything else.

Wang Dong still stopped him: "Wait a moment."

Guo DaLu: "Wait for what?"

Wang Dong: "Yan Qi had already been gone for two days, he should be returning any moment now, we should at least wait for him."

Guo DaLu: "Wait for how much longer? By the time he returns we could be frozen to death."

He didn't have to wait long.

Yan Qi's voice came from outside the wall: "It's best that you guys freeze to death, that way I can enjoy this wine all by myself."

Wang Dong laughed: "Not only is this person's earlobes long, his nose is long. I already knew that once he smelled the wine's fragrance he'd be able to follow it back."

Guo DaLu also laughed: "I wonder what Long Nose brought back this time for us to go with our wine."

Yan Qi: "I didn't bring back anything to go with the wine this time, I only brought back something that would drink the wine."

Lin TaiPing was definitely someone who could drink wine. When people first see him, they would never believe that he could drink that much wine.

Guo DaLu especially didn't believe this when he first laid eyes on him.

Lin TaiPing was a very elegant, fragile looking, handsome person. If one can say that Yan Qi looked a bit girlish, then this person was like a girl wearing makeup.

His lips were very small, even if you used the term 'little cherry lips' to describe him it wouldn't be out of place.

The first time Guo DaLu saw him, his mouth was shut tight, his lips were turning green, it took a lot of effort before they were able to pry his jaws open and pour down some wine.

He was already half frozen to death, starved to his last breath.

Guo DaLu couldn't imagine that there would be someone else in this world who was colder and hungrier than him, he forced a smile and said: "Where did you get this person from?".

Yan Qi: "On the road."

Guo DaLu sighed: "The first time you brought back a cat from the road, the second time you brought back a dog, this time you unexpectedly picked up a person. At this rate, how could you not bring back a large gorilla next time?".

Wang Dong laughed: "Best if it were a female gorilla, that would make a good match for you."

Guo DaLu was not mad, and grinned: "It would be bad if it was a baby monkey, I'd have to call her Mrs.Wang."

His stature was very large, taller than Wang Dong by at least a head. His size was the thing he was most proud of, if someone poked fun at it, not only would he not get angry, he thought it was pretty cute.

He had always thought that this was befitting of a true man.

Yan Qi found a broken bowl, filled it halfway with wine, pulled open Lin TaiPing's lips and poured it down.

After drinking two bowls, his pale face gradually acquired some color, but his eyes were still shut. He slowly swallowed the remaining half mouthful of wine and said some words: "This is thirty year old Zhu Xie Qing. [*A nice brand of wine.]".

These were the first words Lin TaiPing said.

Wang Dong laughed, Guo DaLu also laughed, just based on these words they now regarded Lin TaiPing as a friend.

Guo DaLu smiled: "I didn't think our friend here would be a wine drinking expert."

Lin TaiPing slowly opened his eyes, looked at Yan Qi's broken bowl, raised an eyebrow and said: "You guys use this bowl to drink wine?"

The way he said this made it sound like someone used his nose to eat rice, or his foot to hold chopsticks.

Guo DaLu: "If we didn't use this bowl to drink, what should we use?"

Lin TaiPing: "Drinking Zhu Xie Qing requires an emerald jade cup, using this bowl is simply a waste of good wine."

Guo DaLu laughed: "As long as you close your eyes, there wouldn't be much difference between a broken bowl and a jade cup."

Lin TaiPing thought a bit and then said: "This speech is not wrong, but I would still rather drink from the wine container."

The wine container was in front of him, he really lifted it up, raised his head, and poured it down into his mouth.

Guo DaLu watched, mesmerized, from the side.

After half the container of wine had gone down his belly, Lin TaiPing wiped his lips and said: "Good wine, wheres the vegetables to go with it?".

Guo DaLu: "Vegetables to go with it?".

Lin TinPang: "Don't you guys accompany your wine drinking with vegetables?".

Guo DaLu laughed: "This you don't understand, a real wine drinker takes his wine without vegetables.".

Lin TaiPing thought a bit again and said: "These words do make sense.".

He raised his head again, and drank down the remaining half container of wine.

If a container of wine had been buried away for more than ten years, the wine would be very concentrated, although there was only half a container left over it was more potent than two containers of regular wine.

But Lin TaiPing's face actually hadn't changed colors, and he said: "Do you still have more of this type of wine?".

Guo DaLu could only force a smile: "Regrettably, not only was this wine today's meal for the three of us, it is also all we have that's worthwhile.".

Lin TaiPing paused and then said: "You guys normally only drink wine, you don't eat?".

Guo DaLu: "Very rarely.".

Lin TaiPing sighed: "It seems like you guys are really alcoholics, you ought to know that just drinking wine is harmful to the stomach, you should occasionally have some food."

He stretched, looked around, and said: "Do you guys usually sleep on this bed?"

Wang Dong: "Mm Hmm."

Lin TaiPing creased his brows: "People actually sleep on this bed?"

Wang Dong: "At least it's better than sleeping on the streets."

Lin TaiPing thought some more, and then laughed: "This makes sense as well, everything you guys say all seem reasonable, it appears I am able to be friends with you."

Wang Dong: "Thank you, thank you. We're honored, very honored."

Lin TaiPing: "But right now I must sleep, when I'm sleeping I don't like it when people disturb me, it's best that you all take a walk outside."

He sneezed, laid down on the bed, turned his body, and then fell asleep right away.

Guo DaLu glanced at Wang Dong and smiled bitterly: "It seems not only is his alcohol capacity better than yours, but his sleeping ability is also not any worse than yours."

Yan Qi looked at the empty wine container, paused for a moment, and mumbled: "Did I actually bring back a person, or a horse?"

Guo DaLu sighed: “A horse also can’t drink this much wine.”.

Yan Qi: “Why didn’t you have him drink a little less?”.

Guo DaLu: “Even though I’m poor, at the least I’m not a short tempered person.”.

Wang Dong suddenly said: “I actually think this person is very interesting.”.

Yan Qi: “Interesting?”.

Wang Dong: “His life was rescued by you and brought back here, then he drank up our entire food supply and took over the only bed in this house. But not only did he not utter a word of gratitude, but seemed to think he showed us a lot of face by allowing us to become his friends.”.

He laughed and continued: “Where would you be able to find a second person like this?”.

Therefore Lin TaiPing also remained behind.

Therefore if people mentioned the words “Wealthy Manor” in the martial world, they would not merely be referring to a place near a cemetery.

As soon as you mention Wealthy Manor, people in the martial world will understand that you’re talking about a very mysterious group -- an empty house and four men, the things that happened to them, their happy and lovely story, as well as the marvelous and tremendous friendship between the four of them.

There existed an odd mutual understanding between these friends, that is, they would never ask each other about their

past affairs, nor would they speak of their own past to each other.

But that evening after Yan Qi brought Lin TaiPing over, Guo DaLu broke this pact.

That evening, the snow had already started to melt.

Lin TaiPing was still snoring in his sleep, and Wang Dong naturally didn't want to show that he was submissive, so Guo DaLu could only drag Yan Qi out with him to go "hunting" near the base of the mountain.

Hunting meant going out to see if there were any opportunities to make money.

There weren't.

When snow melts, it was even colder than when snow was falling. After being full from eating, one would go to bed. That was the smartest strategy to defeat the cold. Therefore you wouldn't even see a person's shadow out on the streets.

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi appeared to be two lonely souls, step by step walking across the muddy ground. Guo DaLu was looking at Yan Qi's boots the entire time.

In the end, he couldn't help but ask: "Have you replaced the soles in your boots?"

Yan Qi: "Mm Hmm."

Guo DaLu: "I've never asked you how the soles of your boots could be worth more than a thousand liangs, right?"

Yan Qi: "Right."

Guo DaLu: "I've also never asked how you died seven times, right?"

Yan Qi: "You have never asked."

Guo DaLu's eyes filled with hope and said: "What if I ask? Would you be willing to respond?"

Yan Qi: "Maybe.....but I know you would never ask, because I have never asked you about anything."

Guo DaLu's expression turned soured and he grinded his teeth.

Yan Qi suddenly said: "What kind of person do you think Lin TaiPing is?"

Guo DaLu continued to frown and said: "I don't know, nor do I want to know."

Yan Qi laughed: "Of course we wouldn't ask him, but it should be ok to guess amongst ourselves."

Yan Qi continued: "Something happened that made him leave his family, his clothes are very sparse, that implies that he came from a warm area. He doesn't have anything on him, which shows that he left in a hurry. He might even have fled."

Guo DaLu: "I wouldn't have guessed you were so thorough."

Yan Qi laughed: "If someone were to endure this kind of cold and hunger, one wouldn't survive very long."

Guo DaLu sighed: "At most, maybe two or three days."

Yan Qi: "If you could only last three days, then he could only last a day and a half at most."

Guo DaLu smiled: "That's right, I'm already used to it, whereas he's just a high and mighty young master."

Yan Qi: "In this type of weather, after a day and a half, no one would be able to travel far."

Guo DaLu: "Do you mean to say that his home is nearby and not far?"

Yan Qi: "Mm Hmm."

Guo DaLu: "Which prominent families live nearby?"

Yan Qi: "Not too many, there are even less that are prominent within the martial world."

Guo DaLu: "Why does it have to be a prominent family of the martial world? Can that scholarly cultured person actually know martial arts?"

Yan Qi: "Not only does he know martial arts, but it is also not weak."

Guo DaLu: "How can you tell?"

Yan Qi: "I can tell."

Before waiting for Guo DaLu to ask again, he continued: "As far as I know, there are only two prominent martial families nearby."

Guo DaLu: "Which family is named Lin?"

Yan Qi: "Both of them are not named Lin, Lin TaiPing is not necessarily surnamed Lin, if he really fled from something, why would he tell anybody his real name?"

Guo DaLu: "Which two families do you know of?"

Yan Qi: "One family is surnamed Xiong, their patriarch is "Students Populate The World" Xiong ChuRen, a leader of a

prominent martial arts hall, although his students can be found all over the world, he is a solitary man who not only has no children but also has no wife.”.

Guo DaLu: “And the other family?”.

Yan Qi: “The other family is surnamed Mei, although that one has a son and a daughter, their son “The Stone Man” Mei Rujia has been famous in martial society for a long time, his age should be much greater than Lin TaiPing’s.”.

Guo DaLu: “Why is he called the Stone Man?”.

Yan Qi: “It is said that this family’s martial arts was very strange, all their weapons and hidden weapons were made from stone, therefore his father was called ‘The Stone God’ and he was called ‘The Stone Man’”.

Guo DaLu laughed: “Then what will his future son be called? Will he be ‘The Stone Dog’?”.

This was a very peaceful mountain village, it’s streets were very narrow, and some were even a bit slanted.

The adjacent buildings’ construction was very average. Although the first nightwatch hasn’t been sounded yet, most of the lanterns were already extinguished, and most of the vendors had gone home, even if there were some lights seeping through windows and doors, they were very dim. Very few people would light two lamps in a room, even fewer would light candles because lamp oil was cheaper than candles.

Guo DaLu sighed: “This really is a poor place, people who stay here too long will not only become poorer and poorer, they’d also get lazier and lazier.”.

Yan Qi: “You’re wrong, I like this place very much.”.

Guo DaLu: "Oh?".

Yan Qi: "No matter where I'm at, I would feel very anxious, it is only here that I would feel at peace and carefree."

Guo DaLu: "Because the people who live here are so poor they can't even take care of themselves, so they don't have the energy to meddle in other people's business."

Yan Qi: "You're wrong again, this place is not poor at all."

Guo DaLu laughed: "Of course not when compared to us, but.....".

Yan Qi interrupted him: "The reason you see these people as being poor, is because they don't want to show off. For example, that one store owner Wang Dong knows, not only is he not poor, but he must be a very prominent person."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of prominence?"

Yan Qi: "As far as I can tell, if this person wasn't once a great bandit, then he must have been a famous celebrity of the martial world. I don't know if it was to hide from his enemies or from misfortune, or if he was just tired of martial society that made him come here."

He continued: "There are many people like him around here, if I retire in the future I will definitely stop by this place."

Guo DaLu: "Based on what you said, how could this not be a region of crouching tigers and hidden dragons?"

Yan Qi: "That is absolutely correct."

Guo DaLu: "How wasn't I able to see this?"

Yan Qi: "If someone were to die seven times, he would have experienced more than most others."

Guo DaLu: "But you still haven't figured out Lin TaiPing's origin, since he couldn't be the Mei family's son nor the Xiong family's descendant, after talking for half the day, you've just ended up wasting your breath."

Yan Qi was silent for a long time, then suddenly said: "Have you ever heard the name of 'The Terrestrial Dragon King'?"

Guo DaLu laughed: "Only a deaf person would never have heard of this name, although I may be uninformed, I'm at least not deaf."

Yan Qi: "It is rumored that the Terrestrial Dragon King has a villa nearby."

Guo DaLu: "Do you suspect that Lin TaiPing is his son?"

Yan Qi: "Theres a possibility."

Guo DaLu: "That's not possible, definitely impossible."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "In the martial world, everyone knows that the Terrestrial Dragon King is a bold and domineering seven foot tall person, how could he have such a prissy, girly son."

Yan Qi said coldly: "Whether or not somebody can be considered a man, it should not be dictated by his outer appearance."

Guo DaLu looked at him and smiled: "Of course not, but.....".

He abruptly shut his lips, his entire person appeared dumbfounded.

Originally there was nobody out on the streets, now a person was gracefully walking over.

As soon as Guo DaLu saw this person, his eyes widened.

To be able to cause Guo DaLu to widen his eyes, it had to be a young woman, a beautiful young woman.

This woman was extremely beautiful.

She was only wearing clothes made from coarse cloth, but no matter what kind of clothes she would wear, it would become very attractive. Guo DaLu had never seen a woman with such a good body before.

Her hands were carrying two large baskets, no matter who carried baskets as large as these, they would be waddling along the road like a crab.

But the way in which she walked was still that attractive, enough to make a person's eyes widen; If she hadn't been carrying those huge baskets, Guo DaLu's eyes would probably have fallen out.

This girl originally didn't pay attention to them, but then she suddenly noticed Guo DaLu's mesmerized expression, she couldn't help smiling and let out a charming laugh.

Guo DaLu's heart jumped and started beating like a drum "PU KOU PU KOU", by the time the girl had turned the corner, he was still standing there foolishly.

After a long time passed, he sighed and said: "It seems like this place is really filled with crouching tigers and hidden dragons."

Yan Qi: "I'm afraid that wasn't a hidden tiger, more like a hidden phoenix."

Guo DaLu: "Right, right, right, that's very true, the ancients say every ten steps will contain fragrant grass, this phrase is actually not bad."

He suddenly straightened his posture, and said: "How do I look?"

Yan Qi looked him up and down a few times, and replied: "Not bad, a bit tall, large eyes, a warm smile."

Guo DaLu: "If you were a young woman, would you be attracted to me?"

Yan Qi smiled: "Perhaps.....".

He suddenly realized that his smile not only looked very charming, but it looked a bit like a young woman's, and he couldn't help but laugh: "But if you were a young woman, I'm afraid no man in this world would be able to handle it."

Yan Qi's expression soured: "I'm afraid there are not many women who can stand you either."

Guo DaLu: "Why? Didn't you just say that I was good looking?"

Yan Qi: "But you are also dirty, lazy, unreliable, women definitely don't like these types of men."

Guo DaLu laughed: "That's because you're not a woman, a real woman would like a man like myself, this is how real men are."

Yan Qi looked like he was about to hurl, and grimaced: "Did you think that young woman was attracted to you?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course, otherwise why else would she giggle at me?"

Yan Qi abruptly laughed: “A girl’s laughter has many kinds, they will laugh when they see someone simpleminded or ugly too.”.

Guo DaLu was burning up, and nearly shouted out: “You think I’m.....”.

He shut his mouth again, because that young woman came around the corner and started approaching again.

The baskets in her hands used to be empty, but now they were filled with things, therefore she was struggling with them, the ground was also muddy, her foot suddenly slipped, her entire person fell forward and the baskets flew out of her hands.

Luckily she encountered Guo DaLu and Yan Qi.

Yan Qi’s reflexes has always been very fast, Guo DaLu’s reflexes were also not slow, as soon as her foot slipped, they were like arrows being shot out.

Before the baskets dropped to the ground, Yan Qi had already reached out and caught them; Before the young woman fell down, Guo DaLu had already reached out and steadied her.”.

She panted for breath a little, and then regained her composure. She suddenly discovered that a strange man was supporting her, and her face immediately became bright red.

Guo DaLu’s heart also jumped, and said: “Is the young lady ok?”.

The young woman’s face was red and she lowered her head: “I.....really don’t know how to thank both of you.”.

Yan Qi had already discovered that everything in the baskets were edible, there was smoked chicken, there was beef, there were even some biscuits that were toasted golden on both sides.

He really wanted to say: "If you want to thank us that would be very easy, just give us a chicken and two biscuits."

But seeing Guo DaLu's look of affection at this person, how could he make his friend look bad.

Besides, Guo DaLu had already said: "It's a small matter, don't worry about it."

The young woman suddenly lifted her head, looked at him, smiled and said: "You guys are really good people."

Although she was saying "you guys", her eyes were only looking at Guo DaLu. Guo DaLu's heart was melting, his person was feeling light, and he stuttered: "Young lady, you.....you.....you don't have.....have to be po.....polite."

The young woman retrieved her baskets and abruptly turned around and gave a charming smile, before lowering her head and heading away.

If Guo DaLu's soul was still around, this one smile probably caused it to fly high away.

Although his person seemed to be nailed to that spot, his soul looked like it was being carried away in the basket by that person.

Yan Qi said: "This is such a good opportunity, why aren't you chasing after her?"

Guo DaLu sighed: "Do you think I am really a pervert?"

Yan Qi said softly: “Even if you weren’t, you’re not very far off.”.

The young woman had already walked very far, but now she suddenly stopped, turned her head and smiled: “I bought a lot of food, would the two of you be willing to honor me by accompanying me in a few drinks.”.

This kind of request came from a beautiful woman’s lips, and arrived in the ears of two very cold and hungry men. It must have sounded ten times better than the world’s best sounding music.

If someone refused this invitation, it’d be a wonder if they weren’t stupid.

Yan Qi wasn’t stupid, and neither was Guo DaLu.

Although his lips were still saying: “How could this not be a bother for you?” his pair of legs were already walking quickly over to her.

Alas, why do heroes always find it hard to overcome a beautiful woman.

Why didn’t Guo DaLu just ask this young woman where she was taking them?

It looks like even if she brought them somewhere to be sold off, Guo DaLu would still follow.

End of III

Chapter 1 - Women and Money

Someone once said, women are a source of trouble.

Someone once said, if there were no women, it would be very cold and quiet; With women around, there would not be a moment of peace.

Of course, it was a man who said these words. But no matter what men say, women are things this world must not have a shortage of. Out of 10,000 men, there are at least 9,990 who would rather take ten years out of their lives than not have a woman.

Someone once said, money can allow you to be divine.

Someone once said, money represents ten thousand evils.

But no matter what anybody says, money is also something one cannot have a shortage of. If someone didn't have money, he'd be like an empty sack, never able to stand up straight.

These two things can not only cause the smartest people to become stupid, but it can also cause a best friend to become an enemy.

If four male rascals suddenly gained a woman in their midst, that situation was simply like using a chopstick to reach out for four raw eggs in a bowl, things cannot help but become messy.

Wang Dong, Guo DaLu, Yan Qi, Lin TaiPing, these four people were originally living carefree lives, because they had no money and also no woman.

They would feel happy every time they woke up, because the misfortunes of “yesterday” had already passed on by, today was filled with hope once again.

But, all of a sudden, these two things have both arrived. A horrible disaster, wouldn't you say?

End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Wang Dong had been awake for a long time now, but he was still lying on the ground motionless.

He had first rolled up the cotton blanket into a tube, and then slowly squeezed into it until his entire person was inside the cylinder, all four sides were sealed airtight.

A mouse was running back and forth next to his body, it was cautious at first, not daring to crawl over toward him, but afterwards it gradually began to see him as a dead person and even crawled up onto his head.

Wang Dong was still motionless.

Lin TaiPing's attention had been focused on him for a long time, after a while he couldn't stop himself anymore, silently walked over, and reached out his hand towards his nose to check if he was still breathing.

Wang Dong suddenly said: "I haven't died yet."

Lin TaiPing jumped, startled, and pulled back his hand: "A mouse is crawling on your body, you don't care?"

Wang Dong: "I've never had any interactions with mice, nor do I see them as equals, only a cat would bother to pick a fight with a mouse."

Lin TaiPing paused, and said: "This place really is in need of a cat."

Wang Dong: "This place used to have a cat, it was Yan Qi who brought one here."

Lin TaiPing: "Wheres the cat?"

Wang Dong: "It eloped with a tomcat from the base of the mountain."

Lin TaiPing widened his eyes and stared at him, stared at him for a long time.

The snow had stopped, the stars and moon appeared.

The moonlight came in from the window, and shone on his face.

The outline of his face was very clear, his forehead was broad, his nose was high, even if he wasn't an extremely handsome man, he still exhibited a kind of magnetism.

"This person doesn't appear to be a lunatic, nor a retard, so why does he still seem to have some kind of madness."

Lin TaiPing sighed and looked around: "Where are your two friends?"

He really wanted to find someone to talk to who was not crazy.

Wang Dong: "They went down the mountain to hunt."

Lin TaiPing: "Hunt? Hunt in this weather?"

Wang Dong: "Mm Hmm."

Lin TaiPing couldn't say anything else, he suddenly realized a truism:

Friends of a lunatic are also lunatics.

After a while, a sound "GU LU" suddenly came from the darkness, then another "GU LU" sound followed.

Wang Dong mumbled: “Strange! How come today, even a mouse’s cry is different than how it was in past days?”.

Lin TaiPing’s face reddened, and stammered: “It wasn’t a mouse, it was.....was.....”.

Wang Dong: “What was it?”.

Lin TaiPing suddenly said loudly: “It was my belly calling, don’t you guys ever eat?”.

Wang Dong laughed: “When there is rice to eat, of course we eat. When theres no rice to eat, we can only listen to our stomachs call.”.

Lin TaiPing paused again, he really couldn’t understand, how a person who didn’t even have rice to eat could still be so happy?

Wang Dong suddenly spoke again: “Today your luck is not bad.”.

Lin TaiPing forced a smile: “Me? My luck is not bad?”.

Wang Dong: “Today I have a feeling, that the results from their hunt will definitely be good, what they bring back might even allow you to eat.....”.

He originally wanted to say “eat well”, but before he could finish his words, he actually gave a start.

Guo DaLu had returned, entering the doorway, he actually did bring something back, something that could run, jump, climb trees, and make confusing “ZHI ZHI” sounds.

It was a monkey.

If there was ever a time when Wang Dong’s face would become pale, that time would be now.

Seeing Wang Dong's expression, Guo DaLu laughed until his intestines hurt and panted for breath: "You don't need to worry, this is a male monkey, not a female."

A tender voice came from behind him: "Your friend is afraid of female monkeys?"

Guo DaLu laughed even harder: "He really is a little afraid, how many people in this world are not afraid of their wives?"

Wang Dong's face became stern and said: "Very funny, very funny. How can the world have such a charming man, it is really a strange thing."

Lin TaiPing didn't know what was so funny, nor did he want to know.

He only saw something bright in front of his eyes, within the dark room it suddenly seemed that thousands or hundreds of lamps had ignited.

All the bright light originated from one person, someone who was wearing coarse clothing, carried two baskets, and had already walked in behind Guo DaLu.

Following her were three more people: One adult and two children. The children were dressed very neatly, the adult was wrapped in a leopard skin.

These few people were already enough to look at for half a day, but there was still more. Besides them, there were two dogs, a large bundle of sabres and spears, three or four gongs, and five or six bamboo poles.

Wang Dong muttered: "I always knew he wanted to compete with Yan Qi to see who was more skilled, who could bring

back the most things, but he should at least leave a little face for him, and not make him lose so pathetically.”.

Yan Qi leaned on the door and smiled: “Although I have lost very wretchedly, I willingly admit defeat. I went out twenty times, and the stuff I brought back were fewer than what he brought in one trip.”.

Guo DaLu laughed: “Although my friends’ mouths are bad, their persons are not too bad. Come, let me introduce you guys, this young lady is.....”.

That young woman smiled: “Allow me to speak. I am called Suan MeiTang [*Sour Plum Soup], this is my clan brother ‘Flying Leopard’, and these are my two little cousins, one is called ‘Xiao LingLong’, the other is called ‘Xiao JinGang’.”.

Which one was ‘Flying Leopard’? One didn’t even need to introduce him, and others would understand from just one look.

But the two children looked exactly the same, both had large eyes, both had a topknot, and when they smiled they had dimples.

Moreover, their dimples weren’t such where one had it on the left side, and the other had it on the right side.

Both of them showed their dimples on their right side.

Wang Dong couldn’t help but ask: “Who is Xiao LingLong? And who is Xiao JinGang?”.

The two children spoke at the same time: “Take a guess.”.

Wang Dong winked and said: “The one next to Xiao JinGang is Xiao LingLong, and the one next to Xiao LingLong is Xiao JinGang, am I right?”.

The two children laughed at the same time, one of them ran over, quietly whispered a few words into Wang Dong's ears, and then laughed: "This is our secret, you can't tell anybody else."

Guo DaLu held the other child's hand and said: "Xiao LingLong is your older sister, right?"

This male child shook his head and said: "No, she's my little sister."

Before the words were finished, Xiao LingLong had already yelled out: "Dummy! I knew that all boys were dummies, letting someone trick you so easily like that."

Xiao JinGang's face turned red, and he shouted: "You're not dumb, you're smart, then why are you dressed up like a boy?"

This child's words really pricked like a needle -- women don't look up to men, thinking they were all stupid, yet they still wish they were men, this was a woman's greatest weakness.

Lin TaiPing had been staring at Sour Plum Soup this entire time, and now suddenly said: "Of course these are not your real names."

Sour Plum Soup sighed, and said quietly: "For people like us who wander martial society and sell our talents, who have already lost touch with their ancestors, what kind of real names can there still be?"

Lin TaiPing also sighed: "What can be so bad about wandering the martial world and performing? Some people aren't even able to wander the martial world."

Sour Plum Soup looked at him once more: "It seems like you have a lot of matters of the heart.....".

Guo DaLu suddenly interrupted her: "This person originally seems like a girl."

Lin TaiPing glared at him, his face became a little discolored.

Sour Plum Soup chuckled: "Are you saying that only girls can have matters of the heart? If this is true, how can men not become heartless and lungless imbeciles?"

Lin TaiPing looked at her, his eyes filled with gratitude.

Guo DaLu shrugged his shoulders and said: "Even if men didn't have hearts and lungs, at least they have a stomach."

Sour Plum Soup giggled: "If you hadn't reminded me, I'd almost forgot.....".

She put down the baskets and lifted the paper from the top. She first ripped off a chicken leg for herself and smiled: "A real woman's stomach is not much smaller than a man's, just that sometimes it's not too polite to eat too much."

Xiao JinGang said: "But then how come you've never felt that it was not too polite before?"

She hit him on the head with the chicken leg. Xiao JinGang stole half a chicken and ran away, the monkey was jumping non-stop on the ground, the two dogs were calling "WANG WANG".

Wang Dong shook his head and mumbled: "This place has not been this lively for over ten years."

Guo DaLu: "Don't worry, this place will still have a few more days of liveliness."

Wang Dong: "A few more days?"

Guo DaLu watched Sour Plum Soup's slender back: "Many more days.....I heard they were looking for a place to stay, so I have already rented them the five rooms in the back".

Wang Dong nearly choked on the wine he was drinking: "How much was the rent?"

Guo DaLu raised his eyebrows and said: "What kind of a person do you think I am? A petty man? To demand rent from them? If it wasn't for me, we wouldn't even be able to invite these kinds of guests."

Wang Dong looked at him, looked at him for a long time, and then sighed and forced a smile: "There is something I'm getting more and more confused about."

Guo DaLu: "What thing?"

Wang Dong: "Is this house originally yours, or mine?"

If there is anything in this world that can still make a crude and lazy man become attentive, that would be a woman.

Early on the second day, Wang Dong was still lying in the "tube", Guo DaLu went to get water, and Lin TaiPing was searching around in the room.

Wang Dong couldn't help asking: "What are you looking for?"

Lin TaiPing: "A face-washing basin, a face cloth, and a mouth rinsing cup."

Wang Dong laughed: “Not only are these things I haven’t seen for a long time, I’ve never even heard of them.”.

Lin TaiPing looked as if he just got whipped, he opened his mouth wide and stuttered: “You..... you guys don’t even wash your face?”.

Wang Dong: “Of course we wash, except we take a small wash every three days, and take a big wash every five days.”.

Lin TaiPing: “What does a small wash consist of? What is considered a big wash?”.

Wang Dong: “Yan Qi, wash and demonstrate for him.”.

Yan Qi stretched lazily: “I washed yesterday, today should be your turn.”.

Wang Dong sighed: “Then at least you should bring over the washing utensils.”.

Just then Guo DaLu entered with two buckets of water, Yan Qi used the broken bowl to scoop out a large bowl of water, and took something down from the wall that was both so yellow and black, that you couldn’t tell what color this washcloth was originally.

Only then did Wang Dong make an effort to sit up, he first drank a mouthful of water and held it, used his hands to spread out the towel, gargled, and then with a “PU” spat out the water onto the towel in his hands, casually wiped down his face with it and let out a relaxed sigh: “Good, I’m finished washing.”.

Lin TaiPing looked like he’d just seen a ghost, his complexion turned green and said: “This..... this is what you consider a small wash?”.

Wang Dong: “Not a small wash, a big wash. If a small wash was this much trouble, how would one still manage?”.

Even Lin TaiPing’s lips turned a little green, it looked like he was about to become faint, after a long time he finally breathed out and said: “If anyone can find someone more dirty than you people, I’d be willing to kowtow to them.”.

Wang Dong laughed: “You might as well bow now, the streets are filled with people dirtier than us.”.

Lin TaiPing shook his head vigorously: “I don’t believe it.”.

Wang Dong said softly: “Although we are dirty, our hearts are not dirty, not only are they not dirty, but they’re very clean. If a person’s heart is dirty, even if they scrubbed themselves with soap each day, they cannot be considered clean.”.

Lin TaiPing slanted his head, thought for a moment, and suddenly clapped his hand: “Makes sense, a lot of sense. If someone were to live happily, and has no regrets in his heart, it doesn’t matter whether or not you have rice to eat and it doesn’t matter whether or not you wash your face.”.

He raised his head and laughed loudly three times, then ran to the courtyard, rolled on the ground and laughed loudly again: “I’ve thought it through, I’ve thought it through..... how come I never figured it out before?”.

Wang Dong and Yan Qi held their laughter and watched him, it appeared as if they were also happy for him, because they could also tell that he had been carrying something very heavy in his heart.

All along, he wasn’t sure if what he had done was correct or not. Now he realized it was not wrong.

While a person lives, he has to live with no regrets, that is most important.

But Guo DaLu still washed his face, and mumbled: “It doesn’t matter if you don’t wash, and it doesn’t matter if you do, right?”.

After he finished washing his face, he used the towel to wipe his clothes and scrub his boots.

Yan Qi looked at him coldly: “Why didn’t you just take off your boots and wash your feet?”.

Guo DaLu smiled: “I had actually thought of this point, but unfortunately there isn’t enough time.”.

He suddenly rushed out the door: “They must be awake also, I’ll go back there and take a look.”.

Lin TaiPing: “I’ll also go.”.

Both men charged out, like they’re hurrying to put out a fire.

Wang Dong gave Yan Qi a look and laughed: “A graceful girl makes a good match for a gentleman, why aren’t you going?”.

Yan Qi’s expression sunk and said softly: “I’m not a gentleman”.

Wang Dong: “It seems like you’re not attracted to that Sour Plum Soup girl at all.”.

Yan Qi was silent for a while and then suddenly asked: “What do you think they’re actually doing?”.

Wang Dong rolled his eyes and asked: “Aren’t they all wandering performers?”.

Yan Qi: "If you really think they're just wandering performers, then you're also an idiot."

Wang Dong: "Why is that?"

Yan Qi: "Couldn't you tell that neither the monkey nor those dogs listened to them at all, it's obvious they were being temporarily acquired to further the pretense. And that Flying Leopard fellow, purposely wearing that strange outfit, actually acts like a person who follows the rules, not even daring to speak very much, his hands were white and fine, how does that look like someone who carries boxes and pulls dogs around every day?"

Wang Dong listened quietly, and finally nodded his head: "I didn't realize you were so cautious. But if they weren't wandering performers, then what are they?"

Yan Qi: "Who knows, they might even be powerful bandits."

Wang Dong laughed: "If they were really bandits they wouldn't come here, what is there around here that they would be interested in taking?"

Before Yan Qi could say anything, they heard a startled shout come from the back.

The sound came from Guo DaLu.

For someone like Guo DaLu, even if he saw a ghost he wouldn't be startled enough to shout.

Very little in this world can make him call out.

Yan Qi was the first to rush out.

Wang Dong also moved.

The courtyard in the back was somewhat smaller than the one in the front, and planted full of bamboo. In the past, whenever there was a clear summer night, the owner would lie down in there, and listen to the ocean wave like sounds of the rustling bamboo.

Therefore this place was similar to other courtyards with a lot of bamboo, and called a “bamboo listening yard”. And that row of five alcoves were called “bamboo listening porches”.

However when Wang Dong became owner, they changed to another name, and were called “porches with bamboo but no meat”. Because he felt that although the name “bamboo listening” was originally quite elegant, it had now changed into something very vulgar.

He believed that although the first person to name a yard “bamboo listening” must have been a very refined and clever person, the 80th to use the term “bamboo listening” for his yard was an incurably vulgar dummy.

Now not only was this yard “meatless”, even the bamboo had nearly all been chopped down.

Bamboo could be used for hanging clothes out to dry, and also be used to setup tents, so Wang Dong would frequently take the bamboo and trade it for meat. When a person’s belly gets hungry, he would frequently forget the meaning of elegance.

Sour Plum Soup, Flying Leopard, and the rest of them lived there the night before. But now the people, the dogs, and the monkey have all vanished. Only Guo DaLu and Lin TaiPing remained standing there staring blankly.

There was a box placed beside their feet, a brand new box.

Wang Dong: “Your guests departed without saying a word?”.

Guo DaLu nodded.

Yan Qi coldly said: “If they left, they left. No need to make such a commotion and startle everyone for no reason.”.

Guo DaLu didn’t say anything, and handed over the piece of paper he was holding.

On the strip of paper were a few words written in charcoal: “Five boxes containing our rent.. respectfully request that you accept.. may we meet again.”.

Yan Qi: “One should pay rent when he stays at a place, this also isn’t anything strange.”.

Guo DaLu sighed: “Although it isn’t really strange, it’s just a bit too much.”.

Wang Dong: “What is in the box?”.

Guo DaLu: “Nothing much, just several boxes of stinky coppery things.”.

If you said that money emitted a coppery stench, then the items in these five boxes were enough to suffocate 38,000 people.

The other four boxes didn’t contain anything else, only precious coins. There were coins of every kind, the smallest ones weighing at least tens of ounces, even if they didn’t offend you to death with their smell, they’d probably crush you.

The remaining box was full of gems, all types of precious gems. Rare pearls, jade, agate, and even a few gemstones whose names don’t spring to mind.

No matter which box you were talking about, it was enough to buy up Wealthy Manor.

Wang Dong and Yan Qi were stunned.

After a long moment, Yan Qi let out a deep breath: "When they arrived yesterday evening, they didn't bring these five boxes."

Guo DaLu: "Nope."

Lin TaiPing: "Then where did these boxes come from?"

Yan Qi said coldly: "If they weren't taken by force from someone, they must have been stolen in secret."

Guo DaLu: "These coins are stamped differently on the back."

Yan Qi: "Of course they're different, nobody would store so many coins in their homes. They must have been taken from many different households."

Wang Dong sighed: "To be able to rob so many homes in one night, you'd surely need to have a lot of ability."

Yan Qi: "That isn't strange, master thieves are able to scope a thousand households in a day and rob a hundred at night."

Guo DaLu: "They worked so hard to steal these things, and still gave them to us. A thief like that would be very rare in this world."

Yan Qi: "Maybe they're trying to frame us."

Guo DaLu: "Frame us? Why frame us? We don't have any enmity with her."

Yan Qi: "You think she's really fallen for you, and delivered these boxes here as a wedding dowry?".

Lin TaiPing: "None of these things are relevant, the question is what should we do with these five boxes?".

Guo DaLu: "What should we do? Since they've given them to us, of course we should take them."

Yan Qi sighed: "This person has a really great ability, no matter how tangled the affair may be, once he begins to speak it changes into a simple matter."

Guo DaLu: "This matter was originally very simple."

Wang Dong: "Not simple."

Guo DaLu: "What part isn't simple?"

Wang Dong: "They definitely wouldn't give us so much treasure for no reason, there has to be a motive."

Yan Qi: "And also, since they might be stolen, if we keep them then wouldn't we become thieves as well?"

Wang Dong: "Anything can be done, but thievery is one thing we must not fall into. Once you begin to steal, once you get a taste of it, you won't want to do anything else and will steal for the rest of your life."

Yan Qi: "And even your children will steal. Old thieves give birth to big thieves, big thieves give birth to little thieves."

Guo DaLu laughed: "You don't need to dissuade me, although I've stolen once, it wasn't a pleasant taste and I compensated for it with my last remaining sword."

Wang Dong: "Stealing requires knowledge, not everyone can do it."

Lin TaiPing: "I think our best choice is to take these things and return them."

Guo DaLu: "Who do we give it to? Who knows who these things belong to?"

Yan Qi: "If we don't know, we can investigate?"

Guo DaLu: "Where do we go investigate?"

Yan Qi: "Down the mountain. Since these things were all brought here last night by them, I'd imagine they brought it up from below."

Guo DaLu glanced at the box of valuables and sighed: "You didn't speak wrongly, the place certainly wouldn't be in a poor area..... any place that contains this much gold wouldn't be poor."

Suddenly he laughed: "Therefore this Wealthy Manor, at least for today, is really worthy of its namesake."

Although Wealthy Manor became worthy of its name for a short while, they were still happy.

Because they had come to a very intelligent decision.

Perhaps its because this was the closest they've been to such riches, but they were not greedy, covetous, mean, or try to find a sneaky way to take the money. So they remain merry, like a flower bathed in the spring sunlight.

They knew that happiness was much more lovable than wealth.

End of Chapter 2

Chapter 3 - Mai LaoGuang

Mai LaoGuang was the name of a little restaurant. It was also the name of a person. Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meats smelled so good that the scent reputedly could draw any person or dog within a ten li radius to its door.

Mai LaoGuang was the owner of the little restaurant, plus head cook and waiter.

Aside from barbecue meats, Mai LaoGuang only sold rice and congee.

If you wanted to drink wine with your meal, you would need to purchase it at "Yan Mao Yuan Wine Shop" a few doors over and bring it back or else buy some barbecue meat to take over to Yan Mao Yuan.

There were some people who tried to convince Mai LaoGuang, "Don't you think you could earn even more money if you sold wine also?" But Mai LaoGuang was a stubborn person. So if you wanted to drink wine, you would have to buy it yourself. If you were not satisfied with the restaurant, there really was no other place that you could go to.

That was because Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meat was not only the best, it was also the only such shop within the vicinity.

The citizens of the mountainous city were already reluctant to light their lamps. They would never splurge on a meal outside of the city. So, even if someone did try to come along and steal LaoGuang's business, within a few days they would be out of business instead.

Mai LaoGuang never held any dislike for Wang Dong, Guo DaLu or the others because he knew that, though they were poor, they never tried to get away without paying.

Every time they went to his restaurant, their pockets always contained a couple silver pieces, and they always ate a lot. No restaurant owner could ever dislike a customer that ate a lot.

The corner diagonally across from Mai LaoGuang was Wang Dong et al's "second home."

On this corner was a pawn shop.

Each time they were in the city, they would first take a stroll through their second home. They always came out swaggering more than when they went in.

This particular day was an exception though.

They walked right past their second home, their heads held high, without even stopping. Just by observing how they walked down the street, you could deduce that their pockets most definitely were not empty.

Mai LaoGuang's mind was set at ease, but yet also found it odd. "Has that group of b**tards changed their line of work to become thieves? How come they've suddenly got so much money?" "B**stard" is not necessarily always a curse word; sometimes it can be used as a form of affection.

This time, before the four of them had even walked in the door, Mai LaoGuang was already there welcoming them. In his half-baked, cantonese-accented mandarin, he greeted them saying, "Why are you all out so early today?" You need not fear Heaven or Earth, but you should dread listening to a cantonese speaker attempt to speak mandarin.

It was a good thing Guo DaLu was used to listening to him. Even if he could not understand what he was saying, he often could guess. Laughing, he replied, "It's not the people that have arrived early, it's money. To start, we'll have a couple of roast geese and five jin of crunchy skin pork. Plus, bring us a soy-sauce chicken."

Mai LaoGuang blinked. "No wine?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course we want some. Go grab us a few jin first. We'll include it all in the tab later." His voice was loud and resounding when he spoke because today he was carrying with him an ingot of gold that weighed a total of ten liang.

Since their purpose was to investigate the households that had been burglarized, spending ten or so liang of their gold should not be a big deal. If your stomach is hungry, you can't even be bothered to open your mouth to say anything, much less investigate and get information. Nothing weighed upon their consciences.

As the wine level in the jug slowly went down, the sense of duty in their hearts started surfacing.

Someone else had treated them to wine so they really should complete a task for them.

They were not ones who would try to eat for free.

So, Guo DaLu asked, "Have you heard any news these last couple of days?" None.

The most sensational news in the city was the owner of the general store, Mrs. Wang, had just given birth to twins.

They were starting to think that something peculiar was going on.

Guo DaLu: “Maybe they didn’t steal from this place.”

Yan Qi: “They must have.”

Guo DaLu: “Then why isn’t there anyone here that has had anything stolen? In one night, so many households have been burglarized. That’s a big deal. The city should have been turned upside down in chaos by now.”

Yan Qi: “It’s not that it hasn’t. It has, only no one has said anything; they dare not say anything.”

Guo DaLu: “Having things stolen from you isn’t shameful. Why wouldn’t they dare say anything?”

Yan Qi: “If a person’s wealth did not come from an honest source, even if it has all been stolen, he can only be like a mute who has eaten yellow lotus, bitter yet unable to speak.”

Guo DaLu laughed. “If that’s the case, then it’s really none of our business. We have already done all that we can, right?” By now, nearly all of the wine was in his stomach and it was quickly washing away his feeling of obligation. He suddenly felt very relaxed. In a loud voice, he said, “Bring us a few more jin of wine.” But Mai LaoGuang had not even stepped out the door when three men unexpectedly walked in from outside.

The first man was very tall and the clothes he wore were splendid, sparkling brightly with gold. The second man was even taller and unusually thin. However, no one got a clear look at what these two men actually looked like.

That was because every gaze was drawn to the third man.

His entire body was covered in black, black clothing, black pants, black boots. His hands wore black gloves and on his

head was a black, wide-brimmed felt hat, which was pulled tightly over his brow.

Even if he was not wearing the hat, no one could see his face. A black, cloth hood covered his entire head and face so that only a pair of eyes, sharp as daggers, could be seen.

This type of outfit was only appropriate to wear for people who were doing shady business in the middle of the night, but here he was wearing it out on the street in the light of day.

What did he look like? No one knew and no one could see. From the top to the bottom of his body, there was not a single inch of skin for people to see.

But for some reason, each person there sensed a danger emitting from every inch of his body.

The most threatening part, of course, was still the sword that he carried on his back.

A black-scabbard sword, four feet seven inches in length.

Very few people used this type of sword. Because of its long length, it was not easy to pull out of its scabbard and required a special technique.

Anyone who could use this type of sword would be a difficult opponent. Since removing it from its scabbard was so difficult, the sword would not be so readily sheathed again.

By the time it returned to its scabbard, it was usually stained with blood.

Someone else's blood.

The three men chose a table in the farthest corner of the restaurant. They obviously did not want to disturb anyone and more so, did not want anyone to disturb them.

They ordered “whatever you want to bring out.” That showed that they were obviously not there to eat, nor were they particular about eating.

If people are not particular about what they eat, their hearts are usually filled with worry or they are thinking about something else. And no matter what it is they are thinking about, it is guaranteed to be something unpleasant.

Lin TaiPing’s eyes were fixed on the black-clothed man’s sword. He muttered, “The sword has not even left the scabbard and it is already radiating a murderous air.”

Wang Dong: “It is not from the sword; it is from the person.”

Guo DaLu gave a sigh. “Maybe. I do know, though, that even if I was stone-drunk, I wouldn’t challenge him to a fight.”

Yan Qi suddenly spoke: “I know who the other two people are.”

Guo DaLu: “But they don’t know who you are.”

Yan Qi laughed and answered lightly, “That means nothing. Do you really expect people as famous as them to know who I am?”

Guo DaLu: “They’re famous?”

Yan Qi: “The one sitting closest to the outside, the tall and thin one, he’s called JiaGun¹, sometimes also known as GunZi [*rod or stick].”

Guo DaLu: “GunZi, can see where that comes from. But the name JiaGun is rather peculiar.

Yan Qi: “A jiagun is a type of instrument of torture used by officials. No matter how cunning or sly the prisoner is, when the jiagun is placed on him, he will say whatever you want him to say. You could tell him to call you his ancestor and he would dare not disobey.”

Guo DaLu: “He really has that capability?”

Yan Qi: “It’s been said that anyone who meets him has no choice but to tell the truth. He even has the ability to get a statement from a corpse.”

Wang Dong: “He must use extremely ruthless methods.”

Yan Qi: “He is also known as GunZi, which comes from the meaning, ‘beat anyone he sees.’ No matter who falls into his hands, they still cannot avoid being beaten, before he even says anything, until their eyes and nose are all bruised and swollen. When criminals see him, it’s as if they have seen a deadly ghost or the King of Hell himself.”

Wang Dong: “What does he do?”

Yan Qi: “He’s the constable of the Clear River district.”

Wang Dong: “The Clear River district isn’t a very large place. Isn’t that a waste of talent?”

Yan Qi: “It’s because his methods are too ruthless, that’s why he has never been promoted. But whenever some place has a big case that cannot be solved, they always go to Clear Water to borrow his services.”

Guo DaLu: “What about that dear friend who is all gold and sparkly?”

Yan Qi: "His surname is Jin [*gold], and he likes gold so he is called 'Golden Lion.' But behind his back, people call him Golden-Coat Pekingese."

Guo DaLu laughed. "Speaking from my conscience, he really doesn't resemble a Pekingese dog one bit."

Yan Qi: "Have you ever seen a Pekingese?"

Guo DaLu: "I've seen all types of dogs."

Yan Qi: "What is the largest thing on a Pekingese's face?"

Lin TaiPing interrupted, "The nose."

Yan Qi: "And what is the smallest?"

Lin TaiPing: "The mouth." He gave a laugh, then explained, "I raised several Pekingese dogs when I was young."

Yan Qi: "Guys, now take a look at his face again." From where they were sitting, it was the perfect angle to see this "Golden-Coat Pekingese's" face.

No matter who was looking at his face, there was no missing his nose. His nose took up one-third of his entire face. A person's mouth is always wider than the nose, but his nose was wider than his mouth. If you were looking down from the top of his head, you would not be able to see his mouth because his nose would be blocking it.

Guo DaLu nearly laughed out loud. Suppressing his chuckles, he said, "That is truly one exceptionally large nose."

Wang Dong: "His eyesight must not be very good."

Guo DaLu asked curiously, "How do you know?"

Wang Dong: "Because that nose is like a partition separating his eyes. The left eye can only see things on the left side and the right eye can only see things on the right side." Before he had finished his sentence, even Yan Qi had burst into laughter.

Guo DaLu: "But I still haven't been able to find his mouth."

Restraining his laughter, Yan Qi replied, "That hole underneath his nose, that's his mouth."

Guo DaLu: "I thought it was nose hairs."

Wang Dong: "That's why when he eats, no one can ever figure out where the food has gone." Even though they were all trying their hardest to contain their laughter, they could hold it in no longer. Guo DaLu was laughing so hard he nearly slid under the table.

The Golden-Coat Pekingese suddenly turned his head and glanced at them. That one glance was enough. Each of them could feel a threatening, sharp glare coming from his eyes, which truly did have some resemblance to the eyes of a lion. Even his eyeballs were yellow.

They had already been speaking in low tones but they lowered their voices in further.

Guo DaLu: "And what does he do?"

Yan Qi: "Also a constable. Two years ago, he was a constable in the capital city, but I heard that he was recently promoted to head constable of the northern nine provinces."

Guo DaLu: "He dresses like some playboy. He really does not look like some famous constable."

Wang Dong: "Well, he doesn't look like a pauper."

Lin TaiPing: "And what are his talents?"

Yan Qi: "His nose."

Lin TaiPing: "His nose?"

Yan Qi: "His nose may be large, but it's not useless. Reputedly, his nose is more sensitive than a dog's. He needs to take only one smell of a person, then no matter how much that person tries to disguise himself, he will not be able to escape."

Lin TaiPing: "That truly is not a small talent."

Yan Qi: "The two are both among the best fighters of Six Fan Sect. If it wasn't an important case, there is no way they would be involved. So ..."

Wang Dong: "So you think it's odd that they would suddenly appear in a place such as this."

Yan Qi: "I do indeed think it is very odd. If they are here because of last night's burglaries, how did they get their information so quickly?" At this moment, a woman's piercing scream was heard from the streets. It sounded as if someone had stepped on a chicken's neck.

Then they saw a woman, her hair all dishevelled, rush out from a house across the street. A short, chubby man desperately tried with all his might to grab her. In the end, the woman threw herself on the ground, wailing as she cried, "Even the money to buy my coffin has been stolen."

Why shouldn't I say something?" The more she spoke, the more heartbroken she sounded, and she began to bang her head against the ground as she bawled, "Oh Heaven! You

bl*ody robbers, how heartless you are! Why didn't you leave just a little bit for me? ...

A total of 3000 liang of gold plus my jewellery! I am willing to give half to any kind-hearted person who is willing to help me recover what I've lost."

The man's face turned red for a moment, then pale for another. With great effort, he was finally able to drag her back, but he still deliberately took the time to turn his head and force a smile as he spoke. "Now where would we find 3000 liang of gold for people steal?"

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi exchanged a glance. They were about to ask Mai LaoGuang, "Who is this person?" but JiaGun beat them to it.

His voice was very deep and he spoke very slowly, as if each word required a lot of attention and effort to say. It left an impression that when he spoke, it would be best if you listened carefully.

Mai LaoGuang: "I had heard that they are husband and wife who moved from Kaifeng. They were originally in the business of cotton fabrics and had saved over a thousand liang of silver.

They had planned to retire here and live the rest of their lives frugally. If it is true that their house did have 3000 liang of gold for people to steal, then that would be a real marvel." He was normally not a man of many words, but he was suddenly unusually articulate. Even his mandarin pronunciation seemed much more accurate.

JiaGun was listening.

His speaking had been slow and careful, but he was even more attentive when listening. It was as if he wanted to take

each word that you spoke and slowly chew over it before digesting.

After Mai LaoGuang had finished speaking, he asked, "What is their surname?"

Mai LaoGuang: "The man's is Gao. The woman's, I believe her maiden name is Luo." JiaGun suddenly stood, and with large strides, he walked out the door.

The man dressed in black had not spoken a word the entire time, but all of sudden, they heard him ask, "Is it noon yet?"

Mai LaoGuang: "It is just past noon."

Black-clothed man: "Hand it over."

Golden Lion hesitated. "Is it appropriate to do it here?"

Black-clothed man: "Yes." Golden Lion gave a sigh. He reached into the front of his clothing, pulled out an ingot of gold that weighed about 20 liang, placed it on the table, and lightly pushed it toward the man. Without another word, the black-clothed man took the gold.

Golden Lion exhaled a lengthy breath. Looking out the window at the sky, he muttered, "The day is passing by very quickly." But yet, to some other people, it seemed like they would forever have to endure the hours of this day.

End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4 - The Sword and the Staff

A sword or a staff -- not everyone is fond of the staff. But a staff can be extremely useful.

The staff is more arrogant than the sword. It will only strike after the one who wields it has determined that there is something worth his effort. In contrast, once a sword leaves its scabbard, its sole purpose is to seek out a mortal weakness. Especially this particular sword.

There was a price to unsheathing this sword, and there was a price to returning it to its scabbard. The price to unsheathe it was money. The price to re-sheathe it was blood.

One or two shi chen² passed but Golden Lion and the black-clothed man remained seated where they were. Guo DaLu and the others also stayed. They were reluctant to leave and also could not leave. If Guo DaLu pulled out the ingot of gold to pay their tab, it would be the same as announcing to everyone that he was the thief.

JiaGun finally returned, and Guo DaLu got a clear look at him this time. His face looked like skin stretched over a skull. There was no expression on it, nor was there any flesh.

Golden Lion: "So...?"

JiaGun: "His surname Song, not Gao. He was once the treasurer for 'Liao Dong Beef and Lamb' in Zhangjiakou, but he stole a sum of money from his employer and fled here to hideout. That is why, even though his gold has been stolen, he doesn't dare tell anyone."

Golden Lion gave a grim laugh. "This may be a trick that he [the thief] uses often. Before he strikes, he will uncover a

mistake in his victim's past and use it to his advantage."

JiaGun: "The style in which he commits his crimes is always the same: clean and impressive. Doors and windows are never disturbed, yet gold goes missing."

Golden Lion: "When did the thefts occur?"

JiaGun: "Last night."

Golden Lion: "Once he has decided to strike, he must commit at least 13 large robberies. It is a principle of his."

JiaGun: "Aside from the Song household, I have discovered another five that were robbed."

Golden Lion: "And these five households, do the victims also have crimes that they committed in their past?"

JiaGun: "Yes. There is one who was formerly a lower-level ring leader working for Terrestrial Dragon King before he retired from wulin. Now this person is married with a wife and children."

Golden Lion: "These people have had their run of bad luck already because of this thief. Perhaps you should let them off the hook this time?" JiaGun did not reply; he only looked down at his hands, a cold smile on his face.

Golden Lion gave him a knowing look. "I know you won't let them off easily. Bad luck always happens to anyone who once worked for Terrestrial Dragon King and who crosses your path. But you should be careful as well. You could potentially end up being the unlucky one should you encounter Terrestrial Dragon King or that 'venomous snake.'"
"JiaGun continued to remain silent, and the cold smile never left his face.

Golden Lion: "Regardless, the information we received appears to be correct. It seems that all these years, he has made this place his hideout.

JiaGun: "I knew the information was from a reliable source. Why else would I tell you to pay 10,000 liang?"

Golden Lion: "But he has been in hiding for seven, eight years. Why do you think he has suddenly decided to strike again?"

JiaGun: "It's called a thieving itch."

They were not afraid of anyone hearing their conversation, and Guo DaLu, of course, was not going to pass up the chance to listen in. He could not help but admit that this JiaGun did have a way with things. But who was this "he" that they kept speaking of?

JiaGun suddenly gave a sinister laugh. "Since the robberies were only committed last night, he must still be hiding in the city. I got a look at all the people who left the city this morning. Aside from a group of performers who stood out as a little strange, everyone else looked to be law-abiding citizens."

Golden Lion: "Do you think he would have put the loot with the group of performers to bring out of the city?"

JiaGun: "From observing the dust that they kicked up as they walked, they had no more than ten liang of silver on them."

The corner of Golden Lion's mouth suddenly curled up in a malicious smile. "If that is the case, he is definitely still in the city."

Guo DaLu fought against the urge to interject at this point and ask, "How do you know he hasn't snuck out of the city through some alleyway or back road? And how can you be sure he's not trying to sneak away right at this moment?" But of course, he could not ask them.

Fortunately, he did not need to because JiaGun was already answering his questions. "Each time he strikes, it will be for at least 10,000 or more liang of gold. I have secretly arranged for checkpoints on all routes out of the city. There is no way anyone can hope to escape with 10,000 liang."

Golden Lion: "Of course, he will never willingly spit out something that he has already swallowed. This person values money as much as his own life. He is known for taking everything he can possibly get and once it is in his possession, he will not give it up, no matter what."

JiaGun smirked. "That has always been a bad habit of his. I always knew that one day this habit would cost him his name and reputation! "

Golden Lion: "But this person is extremely shrewd, and he is an expert of disguises. He can even change his height and stature."

Guo DaLu was grinning as he listened, not at all concerned about any of this, especially now when his stomach was filled with the zhu ye qing [*a type of wine] from Yan Mao Yuan.

JiaGun's face did not show a hint of expression as his gaze suddenly fixed upon Guo DaLu. Slowly he stood up and walked over.

His complexion was ashen, and his eyes had a grisly look. If a faint-hearted person were to see him at night, not only

would a confession be extracted, the poor person would likely end up wetting his pants in fear. "This guy shouldn't be called JiaGun. [Chinese] Vampire would be much more appropriate."

The sentence nearly escaped from Guo DaLu's lips. Do not think that he did not dare say it. As long as his belly was filled with wine, there was nothing that Guo DaLu did not dare do.

Wang Dong and the others were not bothered by the situation. "To make friends with this Guo DaLu means that you are prepared at all times to fight for him." To them, getting in fights was an everyday occurrence. Even Lin TaiPing was not an exception.

JiaGun eyes were no longer fixed on him, but Guo DaLu still glowered back. One wrong statement from either party was all that was needed for the fight to break out.

Golden Lion suddenly spoke. "These people do not need to be questioned."

JiaGun: "Why?"

Golden Lion: "If they were guilty, do you think they would be sitting here discussing my nose?" It turned out that not only did this man have an acute sense of smell, his hearing was extremely sharp as well.

A laugh escaped from Guo DaLu. "You could hear everything?"

Golden Lion: "In our line of work, not only must we observe everything around us, we must always keep our ears open as well."

Guo DaLu: "And you're not angry?"

Golden Lion: "Why should I be angry? My nose may be ugly but it is not disgraceful."

Guo DaLu's impression of this man improved drastically. "Not only is it not disgraceful, it's not ugly either. A man should have a large nose, the larger the better. Mature women are attracted to men with large noses."

Golden Lion erupted in laughter. "Your nose is not so bad itself."

Guo DaLu gave his nose a rub and smiling, said, "So-so. It will pass."

Golden Lion: "Do you live in the city here?"

Guo DaLu: "Not in the city. Up in the hills."

Golden Lion: "Are there many people living in the hills?"

Guo DaLu: "Living people, there's only the four of us but dead people, there are lots."

Golden Lion: "Dead people?"

Guo DaLu: "We live in a place right next to the cemetery. It's called Wealthy Manor. If you have time, feel free to come over for a drink."

Golden Lion: "We most certainly will visit." He stood. "Shopkeeper, the bill please. And we will pay for the tab for these friends as well."

Guo DaLu jumped to his feet. "That's not right. We are the host here. You must allow us to extend our friendship as hosts and treat you to this meal." Not only did he like making new friends, he enjoyed treating guests even more.

No one could make friends as fast as him, nor could anyone pay a tab as quickly as he did. However, as his hand reached into his pocket, he realized he could not pull it back out. He could not take out the ingot of gold with everyone's eyes on him.

But Golden Lion did not continue to insist on paying. Smiling he said, "If that's the case, then 'obedience is better than politeness.' Thank you."

JiaGun suddenly tapped Guo DaLu on his shoulder. "The city will be in chaos for the next couple of days. If you have no specific reason to be out, it would be best if you all stayed at home and avoid any trouble." Without waiting for a response, he applied a force on Guo DaLu's shoulder and said, "Do not trouble yourself to see us out the door. Please, have a seat."

Grinning, Guo DaLu replied, "I'm tired from sitting. I prefer to stand." JiaGun had used eighty percent of his strength, yet it did not get a reaction from Guo DaLu at all. He eyed Guo DaLu up and down a few times, then without a backwards glance, he left.

Suddenly, they heard Golden Lion's voice say, "Do you know that person across the street?" On the opposite side of the street, a hunchbacked old man with silvery hair was carrying a bucket of dirty water out of a shop. "SPLASH!" He emptied the water onto the street.

Guo DaLu laughed. "Of course. He's the storekeeper of Li Yuan Pawnshop. We all call him 'Huo BoPi' [*literally, one who skins people alive. i.e. he squeezes people for every penny]."

Golden Lion's eyes never left the old man until he had disappeared back into the shop. "Please, take your time. We

must take our leave now.” He left and caught up to JiaGun. After whispering something amongst themselves, they went together in the direction of the pawn shop.

It was only then that the man in black unhurriedly rose from his seat and slowly walked past Guo DaLu and the others.

They all lowered their heads and sipped their wine. No one wanted to look at him because when they did, it was as if they were looking at a venomous snake. He did not stop, but all of a sudden, he said, “Huang YuHe, greetings.” They paused in confusion. No one knew who he was talking to.

But in several large strides, he was already out the door.

Guo DaLu shook his head and muttered, “Maybe he’s got some sort of problem.”

Lin TaiPing was still staring at the sword on the black-clothed man’s retreating back. “That sword is at least four feet, seven inches long.”

Yan Qi: “You’ve got a good eye. I would guess that you must use a sword as well?”

Lin TaiPing appeared to have not heard the question. “From what I know, only three people in the entire martial world use such a long sword.”

Guo DaLu: “Oh? Which three?”

Lin TaiPing: “One is called Ding YiLang, who is reputedly the illegitimate child of Scarlet Wood San Tai Lang , the FuSang [*ancient Japan] wanderer and Ding Li, the heroine of Yellow Mountain. Scarlet Wood San TaiLang is a swordsman from FuSang’s “Cloaking Wind, Flowing Sword” sect. That is why Ding YiLang’s swordsmanship incorporates the strengths of both FuSang’s and Yellow Mountain’s sword techniques.”

Yan Qi stared intently at him. "I never would have thought that your knowledge of wulin secrets would be even more extensive than mine."

Lin TaiPing hesitated briefly before answering, "I heard it from someone else."

Guo DaLu: "And what about the other two?"

Lin TaiPing: "The second is Gong HongFen, the only successor of Gong ChangHong's sword skills."

Guo DaLu: "Gong HongFen? That sounds like a woman's name."

Lin TaiPing: "That's because she is a woman. Did you think that a woman cannot use such a long sword?"

GuoDaLu laughed. "I just believe that the black-clothed person couldn't possibly be a woman."

Yan Qi: "I heard that Ding YiLang recently went to FuSang to look for his father, so the person in black should not be him either."

Guo DaLu: "What about the third person?"

Lin TaiPing: "That person is 'Roaming Soul Beneath the Sword' NanGong Chou."

Guo DaLu: "Roaming Soul Beneath the Sword? Isn't that a phrase that you would curse someone with [*to die by the sword and become a soul]? Why would he choose such a name for himself?"

Lin TaiPing: "Many years ago, there was a strange person in the martial world called 'Fierce Crucifix Sword.' No one who crossed paths with him could escape his sword. He even

killed 'West Mountain Three Friends' and 'Finest Sword of Jiangnan,' who were all very famous at the time.

Only NanGong Chou has ever escaped from beneath the fury of his sword. NanGong Chou, himself, felt extremely lucky and hence, gave himself the martial name, 'Roaming Soul Beneath the Sword.' "

Guo DaLu laughed. "He lost out to someone else's swordsmanship yet he still thinks he's lucky. This person is quite amusing."

Lin TaiPing: "He is most definitely not amusing."

Guo DaLu: "Why do you say that?"

Lin TaiPing: "It is said that his favourite thing to do is to kill. Sometimes he kills people for his own pleasure, other times it's for money. And though he was able to escape from the Crucifix Sword with his life, he still came out of the fight with a cross-shaped scar on his face. That is why he does not allow people to see his face."

Guo DaLu: "If that's the case, then the man in black must be him."

Wang Dong suddenly spoke up. "Not necessarily."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "How do you know that the person is not a woman, that it's not Gong HongFen?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course it's not."

Wang Dong: "Why? Have you seen his face or his hands? What about his feet? He doesn't even allow you to see one inch of his body. The only thing you saw was his black

clothing. If a man can wear that type of clothing, why can't a woman?"

Guo DaLu paused in surprise, struggling with the thought. He laughed. "If 'he' really is a woman, then that truly would be amusing. I'd definitely want to see what she really looks like."

Yan Qi said slowly, "As long as it is about women, you find it amusing, don't you?"

Guo DaLu laughed again. "Most women are more interesting than men. Of course, the ugly and the old are the exceptions."

Yan Qi sighed. "And this guy actually has the gall to claim that he's not a pervert. If he isn't, then I don't think there are any perverts out there."

Wang Dong gave a loud yawn. "At least I have one thing in common with a pervert."

Yan Qi: "What?"

Wang Dong: "Any time, any place, all I can think about is bed."

Bed!

The five boxes of gold and jewels were still under the bed.

Even the wealthiest person in the world would not take those five boxes filled with their priceless contents and carelessly shove it under a bed, then leave without locking the door.

But that was exactly what they did.

That was because no one would ever dream that underneath that old, worn-out bed was a storehouse of treasures. Plus, there was nothing left in the house. Aside from beneath the bed, there was no other place that they could hide those five boxes.

“Why don’t we bury them underground?” Yan Qi had suggested.

Wang Dong was the first person to argue against that idea. “We’ll have to sweat and work now just to bury it and then a couple days later, we’ll have to sweat and work again to dig it back up. If in the end all we’re going to do is dig it back out, why bury it in the first place?” Lazy people always have a good excuse to refuse working.

Wang Dong’s reasoning was certainly logical.

He was now back to lying on his bed.

Guo DaLu was hanging upside down, fervently practicing how to drink wine in that position. He was determined to learn how to do it. In fact, if he heard of anyone out there who could drink wine through their eyes, even if it was only one person, he would keep practicing until he had mastered that skill as well.

Lin TaiPing sat holding his head on the stone steps at the front of the house. No one could tell whether he was deep in thought or whether something was troubling him. Even though he was the youngest of all of them, he seemed to have the most things troubling his heart.

Yan Qi had slipped away somewhere again. There always seemed to be a hint of secrecy and furtiveness in his actions.

He would often sneak off to some place, but no one would know where he had gone or what he was doing.

It seemed deep into the night already, yet at the same time, it still felt early.

Someone once said, "Time governs all of creation, and only time is truly eternal." But in this place, that saying did not appear to be completely accurate. Although the people in this place did not use time to their advantage, they were not slaves to time either.

When Guo DaLu had finished his third bowl of wine, Lin TaiPing suddenly stood up from the stone steps. The expression on his face was ecstatic, yet very serious as well, like a general announcing to his troops an extremely important battle strategy. Nevertheless, no matter how serious a person's expression is, if you are looking at him while hanging upside down, his face will somehow become incredibly comical. Guo DaLu nearly spurted out in laughter the wine he had just drank.

Lin TaiPing: "I have something to say."

Suppressing his giggles, Guo DaLu replied, "I can tell."

Lin TaiPing: "There is someone who lives in the city whose martial arts is extremely powerful. Not only that, he also knows the art of disguises and the skill of contortionism. He was once responsible for a series of big cases that left the officials with nothing but headaches."

Guo DaLu blinked. "I think I had heard about this before too."

Lin TaiPing: "Not only you, Sour Plum Soup knows this as well."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Lin TaiPing: "Furthermore, she must have a deep-seated animosity, an enmity, towards this person."

Guo DaLu: "Enmity?"

Lin TaiPing: "But she is in the same situation as we are. She only knows that he is hiding out somewhere in the city but doesn't know where exactly nor what identity he is using. Even though she wants to seek him out for revenge, she doesn't know where to find him. Therefore..."

All of a sudden, he did not seem as funny and loveable to Guo DaLu anymore. With a somersault, Guo DaLu dropped back to the ground. "Therefore what?"

Lin TaiPing: "Therefore, she thought up a scheme to get someone else to find him for her."

Guo DaLu: "And of course she must have known that GunZi The Stick and Golden-Coat Pekingese are the best in the world at finding people."

Lin TaiPing: "She also knew that they were already in the vicinity, so she somehow leaked the information to them that this famous thief was hiding in the city."

Guo DaLu: "Then she went into the city and committed seventeen or eighteen burglaries. What's more, she intentionally mimicked the style of how he commits his crimes to lead The Stick and Golden-Coat Pekingese to the conclusion that these thefts must have been his doing."

Lin TaiPing: "That wasn't the most important reason for doing it."

Guo DaLu: "What is then?"

Lin TaiPing: "Her actions would have confirmed to The Stick and Golden-Coat Pekingese that the famous thief is in the city, so they would then put effort into the search. People of their status do not bother making an effort for information that is merely a rumour."

Guo DaLu: "But she had a problem."

Lin TaiPing: "Her problem was, she had all these stolen goods but she had no way of getting them off her hands or transporting them out of the city because The Stick and Golden-Coat Pekingese had already arrived."

Guo DaLu: "Correct. The goods were conspicuous and to hide them would not be an easy task."

Lin TaiPing: "Not only would it be difficult, it would require some effort and thought. That's why..."

Guo DaLu laughed wryly. "That's why she found someone else to hide it for her. But out of everyone out there, why did she pick me?"

Lin TaiPing: "She undoubtedly knew that you lived here and knew that even ghosts don't like coming to this place. Hiding the goods here is like..."

Guo DaLu: "Like hiding wine in your stomach: safe and secure."

Wang Dong suddenly spoke up. "That also was not the most important reason."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Wang Dong: "Most importantly, the person whom she entrusted this task to must be a careless idiot who befriends

every Miss Cat or Mr. Dog that he comes across.”

Not only did Wang Dong rarely move, he rarely spoke either. And when he spoke, his words were usually a conclusion of some sort. But this time, the person who drew the conclusion was not him. It was Guo DaLu himself.

Guo DaLu let out a long sigh and forcing a smile, he said, “Making friends with all the cats and dogs doesn’t matter so much. The real idiot is the one who sees a pretty girl and is so senseless he doesn’t even remember how to move.”

Lin TaiPing frowned. “And who are you referring to?”

Guo DaLu pointed at his own nose and said, “I’m referring to myself.” In reality, Guo DaLu was not as befuddled as he appeared but rather, he refused to put much thought into most matters. Once he actually thought it through, he often understood things more clearly than most people.

Lin TaiPing interrupted again. “You made another mistake also.”

Guo DaLu said with a sigh, “Mr. Guo making mistakes is not a strange occurrence. Now, if he does something right, that would be an amazing phenomenon.”

Lin TaiPing: “You shouldn’t have used that ingot of gold to pay the bill at the restaurant.”

Guo DaLu: “If I didn’t use the ingot of gold to pay, did you expect me to pay by chopping off my fingers? Don’t forget, you drank just as much as I did.”

Lin TaiPing: “If The Stick and Golden-Coat Pekingese find out that we paid using gold, they will certainly wonder where these poor ghosts got the gold from. And when that happens, trouble will definitely be heading our way.”

Guo DaLu: "Could I tell you something as well?"

Lin TaiPing: "Sure."

Guo DaLu: "First, The Stick and Pekingese will not find out because Mai LaoGuang is not one to gossip."

Lin TaiPing: "You have a 'first' so obviously there must be a 'second' that's following."

Guo DaLu: "Second, Mr. Guo having a few ingots of gold on him is not impossible or completely unheard of and is nothing worth getting alarmed over. In addition, I had inspected the ingot, and it had no marking or symbols on it. Anyone who dares say that it was stolen will get a good clout across the face from me."

Lin TaiPing: "Anything other points?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes. Everyone needs to eat, and if we wanted to eat, we would have eventually had to use that ingot anyway."

They heard a voice say, "This is actually the most important point. Sour Plum Soup required a person that is not only a perverted idiot but also an insanely poor and insanely starved idiot." This also was a conclusion. The person who drew the conclusion this time was also not Wang Dong. It was Yan Qi.

Yan Qi's appearances were just as mysterious and quick as his disappearances.

Guo DaLu shook his head and gave a wry smile. "When this guy talks to anyone else, he's still rather civilized, but for some reason, he enjoys throwing insults my way."

Yan Qi laughed. "If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't bother wasting my breath to insult you."

Guo DaLu: "Wang Dong is your friend too. Why don't you try throwing a few insults at him?"

Wang Dong laughed. "You've already exhausted all the possible ways to insult me. Why would we need anyone else to do the job?"

Guo DaLu had to laugh as well. He strolled over and patted Yan Qi on the shoulder. "Where did you slip off to this time?"

Yan Qi: "I ... I just went for a stroll." It seemed that he did not like people touching him. Every time Guo DaLu touched him, he looked very uncomfortable. Perhaps this was because, aside from Guo DaLu, very few people were actually willing to come in contact with him. They only needed to take one look at the clothes he was wearing and they would be retching up the previous night's dinner.

Guo DaLu: "Where did you go for your stroll?"

Yan Qi: "The foot of the mountain, in the city."

Guo DaLu: "There's nothing to see there."

Yan Qi: "Who said there isn't?"

Guo DaLu: "There is?"

Yan Qi: "Didn't you see a beautiful woman carrying two baskets just yesterday evening?"

Guo DaLu: "Well, what did you see tonight?"

Yan Qi: "Murder."

Guo DaLu: "Murder? Who was committing the murder?"

Yan Qi: "The Stick."

Guo DaLu: "The Stick committed murder? Who did he kill?"

Yan Qi: "A suspect."

Guo DaLu: "Who was the suspect? What was he suspicious of?"

Yan Qi: "GunZi is looking for a man in his fifties who moved here ten years ago. Therefore, any man who moved here within the last ten years is suspicious and could potentially be Feng QiWu [*Phoenix Perched in the Parasol Tree]."

Guo DaLu: "Who is Feng QiWu?"

Yan Qi: "Feng QiWu is the person that GunZi is trying to find."

Lin TaiPing interjected, asking, "The Feng QiWu that you are talking about, is it 'Chicken and Dogs Will Not Be Spared' Feng QiWu?"

Yan Qi: "That is him."

Guo DaLu chuckled. "His name is so sophisticated and elegant. How did he get such a horrible-sounding martial name?"

Yan Qi: "Because once he strikes, he will steal everything possible, and a person is left with nothing, not even a penny. Many people that he left in poverty and ruin had no choice but to hang themselves or slit their own throats. So even though he has never killed anyone, the number of people that he has driven to the point of death is not small."

Lin TaiPing: "I have heard that this person is cruel and ruthless. He views money to be as important as his own life,

and he will not spend the money that he has stolen.”

Guo DaLu: “Could it be that he took the money and gave it to charity?”

Yan Qi: “This man has done everything out there but he has never done a single act of charity.”

Guo DaLu: “So where has his money gone?”

Yan Qi: “Nobody knows.”

Guo DaLu was lost in thought for a while. “How many people in the city are potential suspects?”

Yan Qi: “There weren’t many to start and now there are even less.”

Guo DaLu: “How many has The Stick killed?”

Yan Qi: “Five or six, maybe six or seven.”

Guo DaLu glowered at him. “And when he killed, you were right there watching him?”

Yan Qi: “I can’t be bothered to watch anymore.”

With another angry glare at him, Guo DaLu jumped up and rushed out the door.

Wang Dong heaved a sigh. Grumbling under his breath, he said, “Why is it that, ever since I met him, it seems that I have no choice but to get up and move?”

Guo DaLu may not have been befuddled, but he was very rash and impulsive. He should have first asked Yan Qi, “What type of people did GunZi kill?” He did not ask, though, because he knew that anyone GunZi killed could not be much of a good person. He understood, yet he still could not

control his hot-headedness. Even though this was a bad habit, it was much better than being callous and heartless.

The man in black had a habit as well – he would never walk in front of anybody. Of course, this was not a matter of being polite or humble but rather, it was because he preferred to have his eyes on people instead of his back facing them.

At this moment, he was walking behind GunZi and Golden Lion. They were not concerned because they knew that his sword never pierced anyone from behind. Although he wore a black cloth to prevent people from seeing his face, he was still a person who cared much about face and honor.

Silence filled the street. Only two or three houses still showed a dim light in their windows. Their footsteps took them to the fourth house on the left side of the street, where they stopped.

The house was similar to any other house found in the city. Its construction was simple but sturdy, the door narrow and thick, and its windows, covered in yellowed paper, skinny and tall. The dull, yellow light of a lamp shone through the windows. The door and windows were tightly shut.

Golden Lion said in a low tone, “Is this house?” GunZi nodded.

Golden Lion suddenly flew into the air. Although he had a large build, he was adept in lightness kung fu, and his motions were extremely lithe and agile. With a light tap on the ridge of the roof with his toe, he was over and inside the house.

GunZi turned and glanced at the man in black, then in a loud voice, cried out, “This is the state on official business.

Residents shall stay inside with all doors and windows shut. Anyone who disobeys will be killed on the spot.” Before he was finished, the lights inside the house had gone out.

A loud crashing noise disturbed the silence. Someone had broken a window at the back of the house and was trying to escape. But Golden Lion was prepared. They heard a cry of panic, then Golden Lion’s low voice saying, “Where do you think you are going?”

Suddenly, a shadow appeared on the roof of the house. Its display of lightness kung fu was not inferior to that of Golden Lion, but the person’s build was significantly smaller. Hesitating for a moment, the shadowy figure flew off towards the east.

GunZi did not move.

It also seemed like the black-clothed man had not moved. But all of a sudden, he was already on the roof of the house, blocking the shadowy figure’s escape route. In fear, the figure struck out with his two fists. It did not appear as if the black-clothed man had returned the blow, but the figure was already toppling to the ground into the middle of the street.

Slowly, GunZi walked over towards him. With his hands behind his back, he lowered his head to stare at the man on the ground. The wind was bitterly cold in the solemn night. In the darkness, his eyes looked like a pair of awls³. A pair of awls covered in ice.

End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5 - The Pest that Would Not Go Away

The nosey pest, Guo DaLu, had arrived long ago and had watched everything from the corner of the street. Several times earlier on, he had wanted to charge onto the scene.

But what would he do once he rushed over there? If GunZi had really captured that ruthless thief, was he going to help the crook resist arrest? As he rushed down the mountain, the cold wind blowing on his face, his anger had had time to cool down. That was why he now remained where he was at the street corner.

The person who had fallen lay twisted and motionless, like a pile of mud, in the middle of the street. Suddenly, GunZi grabbed him and dragged him into an upright position. With his hands twisting the front of the man's clothing, he spoke, emphasizing each word. "Look at me." Although the man's body was upright, his head was drooping onto his chest.

GunZi let go of the clothing with his right hand, and with it, slapped him across the face ten times. A stream of blood flowed from the corner of the man's mouth, but not even a moan escaped his lips as he grit his teeth in pain.

GunZi sneered. "You have backbone." His knee flew up into the man, whose face contorted in pain. He wanted to bend his waist, but he could not. He could only pull his lower body up so that he was a curled-up mass hanging, shaking, from GunZi's hand.

GunZi: "I have many ways to deal with disobedient people. This is one of the simplest methods. Would you like to try another one?" The man finally lifted his head to look at him,

his eyes filled with anger and hatred. The expression on GunZi's face changed and became unexpectedly pleasant. "Are you Feng QiWu?"

The man's teeth rattled against each other. In a hoarse whisper, he answered, "You know very clearly that I am not. Why did you still attack me?"

GunZi: "Because I am still not certain. Only if you tell me your real identity will I be able to confirm that you are not Feng QiWu."

The man replied, "I am a nobody, only a small merchant who sells groceries in this city."

GunZi's face clouded over again. With his chilling smile, he said, "If you are not anyone else, then I will have to assume that you are Feng QiWu."

The man's voice quivered in anger. "You are afraid that you have the wrong person, and yet you also fear that your superiors will blame you. So even though you know that I am not Feng QiWu, you are still not willing to let me go. I know the tactics that people like you use."

GunZi's expression became gentle once again. "You are mistaken. I am looking for Feng QiWu only. This has nothing to do with other people. So long as you tell me your identity and background, I will let you go immediately."

The man asked, "Let me go? You really will let me go?"

GunZi actually smiled. "Why would I not let you go? Even if you had committed a crime in some other place, what does that have to do with me? Why should I be like a dog that chases mice, meddling in someone else's business?"

The man thought over it for a long time before gritting his teeth and answering, "My surname is Han. I am called YiZhenFeng [*a gust of wind]."

GunZi: "YiZhenFeng. Are you the one who, on a spring day many years ago, committed the murder in Zhangjiakou of that rich landowner named Huang and his entire family?"

YiZhenFeng: "You said that, so long as I am not Feng QiWu, you will not concern yourself with any other matters."

GunZi: "And I do not intend to. But how can I be certain that you are YiZhenFeng and not Feng QiWu?"

YiZhenFeng: "I have a tattoo on my body ..." Rip! The front of his clothing was torn open. There on his chest was the tattoo of a tornado. This was indeed YiZhenFeng's emblem.

GunZi said coolly, "It is true that YiZhenFeng would never pretend to be Feng QiWu, but Feng QiWu could very likely try to disguise himself as YiZhenFeng." He spoke slowly. "I heard that the rich man, Huang, was killed by a single thrust of a sword."

YiZhenFeng: "No. I do not use a sword."

GunZi: "Then how did he die?"

YiZhenFeng: "I first used a poison to kill him and then threw him down a well."

GunZi: "Based on that, you truly are YiZhenFeng."

YiZhenFeng: "Of course I am."

GunZi: "Good, very good..." Without warning, he struck with a backhand motion that sliced across YiZhenFeng's neck.

YiZhenFeng fell to the ground, nothing more than a pile of mud once again.

He was dead, yet his eyes still glared fiercely at GunZi. His eyeballs slowly started to bulge outwards, and they were filled with fury and hate. They seemed to be asking, "You promised you would let me go. Why did you kill me?"

No words were spoken from GunZi's mouth, but his eyes answered for him. His eyes were filled with conceitedness, as if they were saying, "That is my way. I did not trust you, so why did you think you could trust me?"

Guo DaLu's eyes burned with anger. But he remained standing where he was because YiZhenFeng had indeed deserved to die. It was a fact of life that government officers killed criminals.

A voice suddenly spoke, "So it turns out that you only stand and watch, as well, when he kills." Guo DaLu did not need to turn his head to know who had spoken.

He sighed. "But I will continue to watch."

Yan Qi: "You enjoy watching him kill people?"

Guo DaLu: "I am waiting to see him kill one person wrongly."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Then there will be a reason for me to kill him."

Yan Qi: "You want to kill him?"

Guo DaLu: "YiZhenFeng may have deserved to die, but he deserves to even more so."

Yan Qi: "You think that he has done something he should not have?"

Guo DaLu: "You cannot say that what he has done is incorrect, but the methods that he used are vile and despicable.

Yan Qi: "What if he never kills one person wrongly?" Guo DaLu paused. Yan Qi laughed. "There are some things in life that no one can control. And even though GunZi may be despicable, he is very useful. There are some people that need to be dealt with by people like GunZi."

Guo DaLu also laughed. "But you think that no one can deal with people like him?"

Yan Qi: "Who can? You?"

Guo DaLu: "Perhaps myself, perhaps someone else. Who it is does not matter. I only know that one reaps what one sows, and retribution will not go easy on anyone. Sooner or later, someone will deal with him."

This was why Guo DaLu was who he was. He viewed life with compassion and faith. He believed that truth was steadfast and that justice always prevailed. He trusted that goodness would always triumph over evil. No matter what setbacks he encountered, these beliefs would never waver.

Golden Lion was patting GunZi on the shoulder. With a smile, he said, "Congratulations. That is another big case that you have solved. In one night, you've cracked seven cases. Who else besides you could have such a great achievement?"

GunZi: "You."

Golden Lion laughed loudly. "I cannot. My heart is not hard enough. I am slowly finding that I cannot do this job

anymore.” The expression on GunZi’s face changed, but he resisted the urge to reply.

Golden Lion: “Where is the next place?” GunZi lifted his head to look at a sign hanging on the opposite end of the street. It was a black sign with gold lettering: “Li Yuan Pawnshop.”

The owner of Li Yuan Pawnshop may have been tight-fisted, but he was not one to cheat others, and in fact, it was often the opposite. He had left a pretty good impression on Guo DaLu. As he watched GunZi and Golden Lion head towards the pawnshop, he could not help but want to hurry over there before them.

Wang Dong had been standing behind him the whole time but had not spoken a word. He suddenly said, “Do not move.”

Guo DaLu replied with a smile, “I’m not Wang Dong. Why shouldn’t I move?”

Wang Dong: “Any movement now will bring trouble.”

Guo DaLu: “When have you ever been afraid of trouble?”

Wang Dong: “Right now, and what’s more, I’m scared of this type of trouble.”

Guo DaLu: “But don’t forget, he is the ‘uncle’ of our second home. We frequently have to visit him.”

Wang Dong: “Losing this ‘uncle’ is not a concern; losing my ancestors is a huge concern.”

Guo DaLu paused in confusion. “Losing your ancestors?”

Wang Dong: "Should uncle really be a criminal who has a record, if I help him, I will disgrace my ancestors."

Guo DaLu: "You don't need to go. I'll go!"

Wang Dong sighed. "If I could have allowed myself to let you go alone, don't you think I would still be sleeping on my bed right now?" Guo DaLu stared at Wang Dong's expressionless face, into his cold eyes. His heart was suddenly filled with the warmth of friendship. No one would be able stop him if he had set his mind on doing something – no one, except his friends.

By now, Golden Lion and GunZi had already arrived in front of the pawnshop. The door was closed. But before they could knock, it suddenly opened. Owner BoPi's head emerged from behind the door. "I knew that you three sirs would return. Please, come in." Golden Lion and GunZi exchanged a glance, then followed him in. The black-clothed man remained behind to guard the door.

Guo DaLu grit his teeth and mumbled under his breath, "I wonder what methods GunZi is going to use on him. I really should go in to take a look at the situation." But he did not need to go anywhere. Golden Lion and GunZi were already walking back out the door.

They heard Owner BoPi's voice from inside the doorway. "Good sirs, you are leaving already? Forgive me for not seeing you out the door."

With a smile, Golden Lion held his fist in one hand and said, "Please, do not feel the need to see us out."

Guo DaLu watched in amazement as he muttered, "What is going on? Why have these two people suddenly become so courteous?"

Wang Dong: "A stick does not beat people at random. Otherwise, it would not be long before the stick breaks."

Guo DaLu: "But who is Owner BoPi? What ability does he have to make them act so courteously?"

Wang Dong mused, "Perhaps they are being so courteous because he really is a nobody." Guo DaLu mulled over the thought for a while, not certain if he truly understood the meaning of this idea.

But he did not have any more time to ponder because Golden Lion and GunZi's next destination turned out to be Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meats shop.

Guo DaLu furrowed his brow. "It is hard to believe that they would suspect someone like Mai LaoGuang. They are rather overly suspicious."

Yan Qi: "You shouldn't have to worry this time. Mai LaoGuang will definitely not have faults for them to uncover."

Guo DaLu: "Of course I'm not worried, but not for the reason you are suggesting."

Yan Qi: "Then for what reason?"

Guo DaLu: "They are human beings as well, and all human beings need to eat. Without Mai LaoGuang, what will they eat tomorrow?"

Wang Dong: "They can eat fart." Guo DaLu started laughing, but the instant his smile reached his face, it disappeared again. A cry of fear suddenly echoed out from the barbecue meats restaurant. It had come from Mai LaoGuang.

They could hear GunZi's voice asking, "Where did this ingot of gold come from? Speak!" When Guo DaLu heard him say, "gold," he dashed out, swift as an arrow, from where he had been standing. This time, even Wang Dong did not try to stop him. They saw GunZi dangling Mai LaoGuang, similar to how Mai LaoGuang would dangle a soy-sauce chicken. And like a soy-sauce chicken, which would have oil on it, the beads of sweat on Mai LaoGuang's face were like droplets of oil, shiny in the lamplight.

Mai LaoGuang was trembling so uncontrollably that he could not say a single word. GunZi snarled at him, "Are you going to speak or not? Where did the gold come from?"

But it was not necessary for Mai LaoGuang to answer this time. Guo DaLu had already charged inside, and in a loud voice, said, "The gold was from me to buy thirty jin of meat, forty jin of wine, seven geese, and eight chickens. It was a fair business transaction for all parties." GunZi gradually lowered Mai LaoGuang back to the ground, then turned and fixed his gaze on Guo DaLu. As Guo DaLu stood there, dishevelled and untidy, he certainly did not look like one who could use gold to pay his tabs.

GunZi: "The gold is yours?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

GunZi: "Where did it come from?"

Guo DaLu: "If it is a crime to have gold in your possession, then there aren't many people in this world who haven't committed a crime. I'm quite certain even you, sirs, are no exception."

GunZi's face showed no expression, but his pupils had begun contracting. Suddenly, his hands shot forward. He

was not only taller than the average person, his arms were also longer. His thin, shrivelled fingers were like iron spikes on a stick.

But Guo DaLu deliberately wanted to come in contact with those spikes. He neither dodged, nor evaded. “Whoosh!” Both his fists struck out and directly collided with those iron spikes. The attack took GunZi by surprise, and even Golden Lion could not hide his astonishment. Even a blind man would be able to sense that GunZi’s claw attack obviously contained techniques from the Eagle Talon Skill. If this opponent did not have incredible internal energy, why would he choose to collide directly with the attack?

In reality, Guo DaLu’s internal energy was not as astounding as they imagined. It was because he was naturally a dalu [*recall Prologue 1, dalu means to be straightforward, carefree, and a little dense] type of person. Not only was he dalu when he did things or spent money, his martial arts was also dalu. With his attack, would his fist shatter the eagle talons or would the talons pierce his fist? He had not even considered this question, nor had he cared about the answer. As long as he felt like doing so, he would use whatever stance pleased him.

But others were not dalu as he was. In addition, the fundamentals of martial arts tended to place particular emphasis on technique and the changing and shifting of stances. If it was not a last resort, what person would choose to defend by directly colliding with an opponent’s attack?

As Guo DaLu’s fist attack launched forward, GunZi’s moves had already changed. Dropping his elbow, he turned his hand so that his fingers protruded upwards like a grappling hook, and he struck at Guo DaLu’s wrists. But it was as if Guo DaLu had not seen anything at all. He did not even change his attack in the slightest. “To be unchanging is to

change. Be unchanging to counter ten thousand changes.” This too was one of the highest principles of martial arts.

GunZi somersaulted in midair to avoid the attack and nearly collided with the wall.

It could basically be said that Guo DaLu had not even completed one move, and he had already forced this top-tier fighter of the Six Fan Sect to retreat.

He was quite pleased with himself and did not pursue the fight. It was not that he did not understand the concept of “pursue and strike while you are winning,” but since his opponent had already expressed fear and defeat by retreating, why would he continue to chase him? Ruthlessness was never a characteristic of Guo DaLu.

Golden Lion cleared his throat a couple of times and stepped forward. “Young friend, all matters can be discussed. There is no need to have such a big temper tantrum.”

Guo DaLu: “It’s him that has the temper problem. He wanted to come over and beat on me. How is it that I’m the one with the temper tantrum?”

Golden Lion: “Misunderstanding. It’s just all a misunderstanding.”

Guo DaLu: “Nevertheless, he’s been asking me so many questions, I would like to ask him one as well.”

Golden Lion: “Please ask.”

Guo DaLu: “Has someone committed a criminal offense if he uses gold to pay for food and wine?”

Golden Lion smiled. “Of course not. I also frequently pay for my tabs using gold.”

Guo DaLu: "Since it's not a crime, then please release Mai LaoGuang, and please release me as well."

Golden Lion: "Of course, of course." He cast a sidelong glance at Wang Dong, Yan Qi, and Lin TaiPing, who were standing outside the door. "We had already accepted your hospitality this afternoon. Tonight, how about letting me assume the role of host and treat all of you to a few drinks?" Guo DaLu hesitated. It was apparent that he was being swayed. It was not because he wanted a free meal but rather, he felt bad saying no to people's offers.

Wang Dong: "Right now, I don't want to think about anything. All I want to do is climb back into my bed."

Golden Lion laughed. "That's fine too! We had wanted to pay you a visit at your home anyways. What do you think if we take advantage of this opportunity to go to your home and drink the night away?"

The way he put the question, even Wang Dong did not know how to refuse. When members of the Six Fan Sect wanted to go to your home for a "visit," who had the ability to say no? Furthermore, if they were at Wealthy Manor, they would not be able to kill any more people.

So, they went to Wealthy Manor.

End of Chapter 5

Chapter 6 - The Secret Underneath the Bed

Anyone who first heard the name “Wealthy Manor” before actually going there was guaranteed to be shocked when they arrived. It was not often that you saw a manor that was “wealthy” in the way that this one was.

Guo DaLu laughed. “Normally this place does not have lamps or oil, but fortunately, I bought some candles today or else we would all have to eat in the dark.”

Wang Dong: “Actually, eating in the dark can be quite entertaining.” Once he returned home, the first thing he usually did was take off his shoes and climb onto his bed. Today, though, he did not even walk in that direction, but rather, sat down far away from it and said, “If you do not mind that it is dirty, please feel free to take a seat on the floor.”

Golden Lion laughed. “That is an ancient practice anyway. Our ancestors originally sat on the floor.”

Guo DaLu: “We have captured the spirit of ancient customs more completely than anyone else then. We even sleep on the floor.”

Golden Lion: “So what about the bed?”

They had all been trying to prevent the guests from focusing their attention on the bed, but anyone who walked into the house could not help but notice it.

Wang Dong: “I sleep on the bed by myself.”

Guo DaLu: "It's not because this owner of the bed is being selfish. It's because we think it's too dirty."

They were the only three in the house who were speaking. Lin TaiPing, Yan Qi, and GunZi had not even opened their mouths, and the black-clothed man still had not stepped through the doorway. He stood in the courtyard holding his hands behind his back, blending into the gloominess of the night.

Golden Lion: "Young friend, may I ask who taught you your martial arts?" Everyone was relieved that he had changed the topic away from discussing the bed.

Guo DaLu: "I have several shifu, but they have only ever taught one student."

Golden Lion: "And may I ask who they are?"

Guo DaLu: "The teacher who taught me basic skills is 'Divine Fist Expert,' Mr. Liu Hu. Then there is 'Invincible Sabre,' Mr. Yang Bin; 'Spear Piercing Nine Dragons,' Teacher Zhao Guang; 'Divine Sabre Iron Arm,' Mr. Hu DeYang; ..." Golden Lion's eyes widened as he listened. The more names Guo DaLu rattled off, the wider his eyes became, as if he was in shock. He really had never heard of any of these names.

In the martial world, there was an interesting reality: the more intimidating a person's martial name, the more average and insignificant his martial arts, especially names along the lines of "Spear Piercing Nine Dragons" or "Divine Sabre Iron Arm," which sounded like names of street performers. If a reputable martial arts master chose such a martial name for himself, people would laugh so hard that their front teeth fell out.

After spitting out all these elaborate martial names, Guo DaLu smiled and asked, "Have you ever heard my shifus' names mentioned before?"

Golden Lion coughed a couple of times. "I have long heard of these names. Ahem... long heard of them." With a sudden lift of his leg, he darted to the bed. Grabbing the edge of it, he jumped into the air and lifted the bed with him. Guo DaLu, Wang Dong, Yan Qi, and Lin Tai Ping felt as if their hearts were also being tossed upwards.

Should the five boxes underneath the bed be discovered that day, even if they could ward off Golden Lion's sabre, GunZi's claw, and the black-clothed man's sword, they still would never be free from the stigma of being a thief. They were still young; if they had to carry the shame of being a thief, when would they ever be able to hold their heads up again?

But there was not a single box under the bed; there was nothing at all.

Guo DaLu nearly shouted out in surprise. Golden Lion also appeared to pause for a moment before he slowly lowered the bed. Forcing a smile, he said, "I was certain that I just saw a mouse. Where did it suddenly disappear to?"

With a cool tone, Wang Dong asked, "Was it a white mouse or a black one?"

Golden Lion: "Um... I could not see it very clearly."

Wang Dong: "A white mouse indicates wealth. White mice are frequently seen in places where gold is hidden. Tomorrow, I'll still go dig in that spot to be sure; perhaps there really are a few boxes of gold buried there." His face was still cold and did not show a hint of expression on it.

Guo DaLu shot a glare at him. "Perhaps if you, Brother Jin, stayed here for a while, you might gain a small fortune as well."

Golden Lion forced another smile. "No thank you. I was not destined to have easy money."

Even though the manor was old, much attention had been paid during its original construction. The ground was paved with bluestone tiles, but moss had grown in the gaps between the tiles. Anyone could see that the tiles had not been moved for at least ten years.

GunZi suddenly stood. "I feel drunk. We will say our farewells." He had not drank a single drop of wine and was obviously lying, but no one was going to point this out. Everyone felt that the lie had been spoken at the perfect moment.

GunZi and Golden Lion had left for quite some time before Guo DaLu could breathe easy again. Smiling, he said, "Our Wang Laoda [*biggest brother] is brilliant. If he hadn't moved the boxes, we would have been caught red-handed."

Wang Dong: "Who is Wang Laoda?"

Guo DaLu: "You, of course."

Wang Dong: "Do you actually think that I am the person who moved those five boxes and then hid them?" Guo DaLu paused. It was probably easier to tell the boxes to move Wang Dong than to get Wang Dong to move boxes.

Scratching his head, Guo DaLu asked, "But if it wasn't you, who was it?" He turned his head and saw YanQi.

Yan Qi: "Don't look at me. I'm not necessarily much more hardworking than Wang Laoda."

Lin TaiPing: "I have never moved boxes in my entire life." His hands were white and small and nearly softer than a young girl's face.

Guo DaLu scratched his head until his scalp nearly bled. "So if none of you moved the boxes, did they grow legs and run away themselves?"

Guo DaLu scratched his head until his scalp nearly bled. "So if none of you moved the boxes, did they grow legs and run away themselves?"

Wang Dong: "The boxes may not have legs, but Sour Plum Soup does. And, she should definitely have a pair of nice-looking feet." Wang Dong's sentences usually were a conclusion. Aside from Sour Plum Soup, they simply could not think of anyone else who would know that there were five boxes under the bed, much less move those boxes.

Yan Qi: "She accomplished her purpose, so naturally, she would not leave us those five large boxes for free."

Lin TaiPing: "And she took advantage of the opportunity to move the boxes out when she saw us all head down the mountain."

Wang Dong stretched lazily. "It's actually good that she moved them. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to sleep comfortably on my bed."

Lin TaiPing: "I find one thing strange, though. None of us even glanced in the direction of the bed. Why would Golden Lion be suspicious that there was something under the bed?"

Wang Dong: "Perhaps he was suspicious because of the fact that none of us cast a single glance at the bed." This was

also a conclusion: the more you deliberately demonstrate that you do not care about something, the more it shows that you actually do care. This is especially true with girls. If a girl is friendly and pleasant to everyone and only ignores you, then that possibly means that in her heart, there is nobody but you.

Lin TaiPing let out a sigh and said, "It seems that this Pekingese is truly a formidable individual."

Yan Qi: "The man is shrewd and cunning. Behind his smiles, he hides daggers. He is much more fearsome than GunZi."

Guo DaLu had not spoken in quite a while but suddenly said, "The boxes were definitely not taken by Sour Plum Soup."

Yan Qi: "If it wasn't her, who was it?"

Guo DaLu: "If she had really wanted to transport the boxes, she would not have stayed here yesterday."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Moving those five boxes out of the city would have been a lot more difficult today compared to yesterday. Why wouldn't she have chosen to do it yesterday instead? Is she a fool?"

Yan Qi laughed sarcastically. "Of course she's not the fool. I am. But I still cannot think of anyone else who would have moved the boxes."

Guo DaLu suddenly laughed. "Why is it that every time Sour Plum Soup is mentioned, you become grouchy? Could it be that you have taken a fancy to her as well? Would you like me to give her up to you?"

Yan Qi: “Why do I need you to give her up? Does she belong to you?”

Lin TaiPing sighed. “You haven’t even had the chance to drink your sour plum soup, and you have already drank several bowls of vinegar [*to drink vinegar is to be jealous]. Why would you do that to yourself?”

Yan Qi smiled. His smile was unique and very attractive. When people smile, some smiles start at the eyes, others start on the face. His smile, though, started at his nose, which would wrinkle up into a little spot. It would then spread until two deep dimples slowly appeared on his face. Guo DaLu stared at him. Shaking his head, he said, “If this guy did not act the way he does, I would definitely think that he was a woman.”

Yan Qi glared back at him. “If I am a woman, then you’re a big flirt.”

Guo DaLu: “Of course I know that you’re not a woman. But your smile, your dimples...”

Yan Qi: “So what if I have dimples? Don’t you know that dimples only mean that you can hold a lot of wine?”

Guo DaLu suddenly reached out and grabbed his hand. “Let’s go! We’ll go drink some wine.”

Yan Qi: “Where?”

Guo DaLu: “At the foot of the mountain.”

Yan Qi: “The wine here has not even been finished. Why would you want to go down the mountain?”

Guo DaLu blinked. “I have heard that Mai LaoGuang barbecues his meats in the middle of the night. I want to eat

a barbecue duck fresh out of the furnace.”

Yan Qi: “I’m not as gluttonous as you are. Go by yourself.”

Guo DaLu: “You know I never drink alone.”

Yan Qi: “You can bring Wang Laoda with you.”

Guo DaLu: “Even if held a knife to his throat right now, he still would not get out of his bed.”

Yan Qi: “If he does not go, I’m not going either.”

Guo DaLu laughed. “You’re not some lady. Why would you not feel comfortable going with me?”

For a moment, it seemed as if Yan Qi’s face had turned pink. “I said I’m not going and I mean it. Why won’t you let go of me?”

Guo DaLu laughed. “I am going to make you go. I don’t care if you are a guy or a girl, you’re going with me.”

Wang Dong gave a sigh. “In my opinion, you should just go with him. You have only yourself to blame for not being more careful when you chose to befriend him. Now if you don’t go, I will not be able to get any sleep either.”

Yan Qi also sighed. “It is fortunate that I am a man. If I was a woman, I really would not be able to put up with him.”

Laughing, Guo DaLu replied, “If you really were a woman, I think I would be the one who wouldn’t be able to stand it.” When you cross paths with someone like Guo DaLu, you never know what to do with him.

In the end, he finally managed to drag Yan Qi out with him. However, they had just stepped out the front door when the two of them paused in surprise. It was already deep into the

night. The people of the mountain city should have been fast asleep, and some would actually soon be rising out of bed. But the foot of the mountain was illuminated by the light of lamps and candles. In the three months since Guo DaLu had arrived, he had never once seen the city lit up so brilliantly. Guo DaLu asked, "Could it be that today is the New Year?"

Yan Qi: "I don't think so."

Guo DaLu: "If it's not New Year's, then why is it so lively?" He grabbed Yan Qi's hand again. "Let's hurry and join in with the excitement."

Yan Qi: "I know how to walk. Why do you feel the need to always hold onto my hand?"

Guo DaLu grinned back at him. "If you don't want me to hold your hand, then you should hold my hand instead."

Yan Qi sighed. "It seems that I should change my name to Yan Ba." [*ba = eight]

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Meeting someone like you makes me want to go die one more time."

End of Chapter 6

Chapter 7 - Mai LaoGuang and his Barbecue Duck

There were only approximately 300 households in the mountain city, but at the moment, each one had lit its lamps and thrown its doors wide open as if to welcome the God of Wealth. In reality, though, it was not the God of Wealth they were welcoming but actually a god of pestilence [*a way to call someone an annoyance or pest]. Dozens of men, wearing red-tassel hats and uniforms and carrying sabres at their waist and torches in their hands, were searching through each house.

Yan Qi and Guo DaLu had just reached the foot of the mountain when they came across Golden Lion standing at the end of a street with his hands behind his back, barking in a loud voice, like a general on a battleground who was accustomed to issuing orders. Guo DaLu greeted him saying, "General Jin, are you planning on turning this place into a battlefield?"

Golden Lion's face, which had previously had an icy expression on it, broke into a smile when he saw Guo DaLu. "We had no other choice; otherwise, we would have preferred not to disturb these honest citizens."

Yan Qi: "Since you knew they are honest citizens, why would you disturb them in the first place?"

Golden Lion sighed. "All we know is that the stolen goods are still somewhere in the city and have not been transported away yet, but we do not know which house they are hidden in. The officers of the surrounding eighteen districts have all been brought in for the case, and one by one, all households will be investigated." He gave another little smile. "As long

as we find where the loot is hidden, Feng QiWu has no hope of trying to escape.”

Guo DaLu: “If that’s the case, I won’t be able to go into town tonight?”

An expression flickered across Golden Lion’s gaze. “What matters do you have in town at such hours of the night?”

Guo DaLu: “Drinking.”

Golden Lion: “At Mai LaoGuang’s?”

Guo DaLu: “Uh huh. Our wine on top of the mountain is done, but our alcohol craving still hasn’t been satisfied.”

Golden Lion: “We already searched that place during the first half of the night and seized only one ingot of gold. Feel free to go; you need not worry.” He made a hand signal to the officer patrolling the road, then moved out the way for the two of them.

They had walked a fair distance before Yan Qi said with a smile, “He seems to respect you.”

Guo DaLu laughed. “That is only because he hasn’t been able to figure out my background. He doesn’t even have a clue.”

Yan Qi laughed also. “Those names that you listed, are they truly all names of your shifus?”

Guo DaLu: “There was not a single lie.”

Yan Qi: “Even though much cannot be said about your martial arts, I can guarantee you that those shifus’ teachings would not have produced a student of your calibre.”

Guo DaLu: “What I learned from them was not the strengths of their martial arts but rather, the shortcomings.”

Yan Qi furrowed his brow. “Shortcomings?”

Guo DaLu: “If I observed any flaws or weaknesses in their martial arts, I would think of methods to avoid them in my own. This is called, ‘As I walk in a group of three, I will always find a teacher.’⁴ No matter who the person is, you can always learn something from him.”

Yan Qi: “I couldn’t tell before, but it seems you do possess knowledge of some sorts.”

Guo DaLu replied in a serious tone, “I don’t have to be modest in front of you. To be frank, my knowledge of things is quite expansive.”

Yan Qi could not help laughing. He asked, “So then, where did you learn all your strengths from?”

Guo DaLu: “Have I ever asked you about the secret in the soles of your boots? Or how you have already died seven times?”

Yan Qi: “No.”

Guo DaLu: “Well then, why are you asking about me?”

Mai LaoGuang was an old bachelor. His shop only had a total of four rooms. One room was at the front and was his place of business for customers. Another room was used as his kitchen. The third room was where he slept. But the most important room was at the back of the shop: his roasting room.

The door to this room was always closed because Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meats were made using a secret recipe. If someone were to steal and learn that recipe, he would be put out of business.

When Yan Qi and Guo DaLu arrived, Mai LaoGuang was in that roasting room. The door was closed, but waves of mouth-watering scents were already wafting through the seam of the door. Guo DaLu swallowed his saliva hungrily before calling, "LaoGuang, business has arrived. Hurry and come out!" However, quite a few moments passed before Mai LaoGuang finally emerged. When he stepped out, they saw that his entire body was covered in grease, as if he had just rolled around in a mound of lard.

He broke into a smile when he saw Guo DaLu. "I reckon that nobody in these hills will have a good sleep tonight, so tomorrow morning's business is going to be particularly good. Tonight was an especially busy night since I deliberately roasted several dozen additional ducks."

Guo DaLu smiled. "LaoGuang, you don't have children or a wife, and on top of that, you live and eat frugally. You are even reluctant to buy yourself a new item of clothing. Why do you want to earn so much money?"

With his Cantonese-accent, Mai LaoGuang replied, "People in my line of work are always rolling around in grease. What would I do with new clothes anyways? Now, as for money, it has always been the more the better."

Yan Qi also smiled. "His words are straightforward and honest."

Mai LaoGuang: "Straightforward people always speak straightforward words."

Guo DaLu: "Mai LaoGuang truly is a straightforward person. Rumour has it that, even though he has been here for more than ten years, he has not stepped into Stone Alley, which is just beyond the stone stele that commemorates the chastity of the widow, Mrs. Zhao."

Yan Qi: "What type of place is Stone Alley?"

Guo DaLu: "Stone Alley is a great place. Not only are there many beautiful women there, they are all sweet, gentle, and considerate."

Yan Qi glared at him. "And you have been there?"

Guo DaLu: "No, but not because I don't want to go. Every time I am drunk and I am not able to walk there."

Yan Qi: "Well, why didn't you go when you sobered up?"

Guo DaLu: "I don't dare go when I am sober."

Yan Qi: "You? You would actually not dare to do something?"

Guo DaLu: "I am scared that when those beautiful women see such a handsome man, they will not let me go."

Yan Qi could not help but laugh. "And such a place coincidentally has to set-up behind someone's chastity stele. Don't you think that would infuriate Mrs. Zhao?"

Mai LaoGuang: "Will the two of you be drinking wine so late in the night?"

Guo DaLu: "He wanted to come here to eat your fresh-out-of-the-furnace barbecue duck."

Mai LaoGuang: "Sure. I will go bring out a plump one for you." He turned around and started walking.

Guo DaLu followed him. "I'm going to go with you to the back to take a look around."

Mai LaoGuang stopped. "It is very dirty in the back, and there is nothing interesting to see."

Guo DaLu: "I'm not afraid of getting dirty. I am dirty enough as it is."

Yan Qi sighed. "If he really wants to go, it would be best for you to just let him go. Otherwise, he will just continue to insist on going, even if it means waiting here and bothering you until next day's morning."

Mai LaoGuang smiled. "It is very dim in the back. Be careful where you step."

The rear courtyard was truly very dark. In the furthest corner was the roasting room, and it was also a dim room. Mai LaoGuang shuffled forward slowly. With a smile on his face, Guo DaLu said, "Watching how you walk, it looks as if you've had a bit to drink too."

Mai LaoGuang: "The night has been quite chilly. But I only drank a couple cups of wine to warm up before I started feeling a little tipsy." His foot suddenly slipped out from beneath him, and it seemed as if he would fall.

Guo DaLu was reaching out his hand to support him, when without warning, Mai LaoGuang spun around. His motion was like a dragon soaring out of the sea, like a sparrow hawk spiralling through the sky; the strength and nimbleness simply could not be described with words. Guo DaLu had just stretched his arm forward before Mai LaoGuang had already grasped the vein on his wrist.

Yan Qi had never dreamed that this clumsy old man who could barely walk without falling could suddenly become so

terrifying. Still in shock, he tried to rush over, but Mai LaoGuang was already speaking in a raspy voice, "Stand still or I will kill him." The sentence was spoken in perfect Mandarin, without a hint of a Cantonese accent.

Yan Qi paused in disbelief. Stuttering, he said, "You... you are..."

Guo DaLu laughed. "He is Feng QiWu, and the one who took the boxes from beneath our bed. Have you still not figured it out yet?"

Guo DaLu laughed. "He is Feng QiWu, and the one who took the boxes from beneath our bed. Have you still not figured it out yet?" There he was, his life at the mercy of someone else, yet he still grinned as if he simply could not be bothered by the situation.

Mai LaoGuang responded in a cool tone, "You are correct; I am Feng QiWu. How did you know?"

Guo DaLu: "Originally, it was just a wild hypothesis of mine. Aside from GunZi, Golden Lion, the black-clothed man, and the four of us, only you knew that we had gold, and only you had the opportunity to slip in front of us to transport all the boxes while we leisurely walked back up the mountain." A cold smile showed on Feng QiWu's face. "In addition, since GunZi and Golden Lion had already wrongly accused you once, logically, they would not suspect you again. And because no one is ever allowed in your roasting room, there is no better place to hide the boxes."

Feng QiWu: "Anything else?"

Guo DaLu: "Golden Lion's nose is particularly sensitive. He had seen you before in the past, so you knew that he would recognize your scent. That is why you deliberately chose to

disguise yourself by working in this occupation.” Wiggling his nose, he drew in a deep breath. “Because nobody’s scent could ever be stronger than charcoal. Even a woman with bad body odour is not an exception.”

Feng QiWu: “Anything else?”

Guo DaLu: “I have heard that Feng QiWu is a miserly, penny-pinching person. If he found money on the ground, he still would be unwilling to spend it. He won’t even find himself a wife. In the time I have been here, I have not seen anyone stingier than you. You will not even make yourself fresh food to eat but will rather choose to eat your customers’ leftovers.”

He suddenly laughed out loud. “I suddenly realized that your name, ‘Feng QiWu,’ is extremely appropriate. The poet, Lin Hejing⁵] was said to have taken plum blossoms as his wife and cranes as his children. Your wife, though, is yourself; that is why you are called ‘qi wu.’ ” [*a pun using Feng QiWu’s name, which also sounds like 妻 qi, meaning ‘wife’ and 我 wu, meaning ‘I’ or ‘me’]

He seemed to appreciate his own wittiness very much; he was laughing so hard tears were flowing out of his eyes. But no one else was laughing.

Feng QiWu stared unemotionally at him until his laughter had finally died down, then asked, “Anything else?”

Guo DaLu: “No. But when you add up the three points that I stated, that is enough. Feng QiWu is Mai LaoGuang and Mai LaoGuang is Feng QiWu.”

Feng QiWu: “I never would have thought that a silly youngster like you would have a moment of intellect.”

Guo DaLu: “Even the stupidest person will have one or two ingenious instances in his life. I am a natural genius, who merely, at times, enjoys pretending to be a little confused.”

Feng QiWu: “Do you want to go into my roasting room?”

Guo DaLu: “I did originally.

Feng QiWu: “Go in.”

Guo DaLu: “Even though I had wanted to go in before, I don’t want to anymore. I don’t want someone to hang me from the rack and roast me like a duck.”

Feng QiWu gave him a cool smile. “Unfortunately, whether you go in or not is no longer up to you.”

Yan Qi: “It would be no use if you killed him; I will escape and will still broadcast your secret to the world.”

Feng QiWu: “When he goes into the room, you are going to follow because you are not going to let any opportunity to save your friend slip away. I have lived for fifty, sixty odd years, and this little detail does not escape me.”

Yan Qi gritted his teeth, and his eyes turned red. Even a two year old child would be able to tell how concerned he was for Guo DaLu, much less someone with fifty, sixty years of experience in jianghu.

Guo DaLu threw back his head and laughed loudly. He spoke to Yan Qi. “If, in a man’s life he has one soul mate, even if he dies he will have no regrets. I have such a good friend in you; life or death does not matter anymore. Except...”

Feng QiWu: “Except what?”

Guo DaLu: “I know that you will not kill us.”

Feng QiWu: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "Not only does Wang Laoda know that we were coming here, Golden Lion also knows. If the two of us suddenly vanish, don't you think they will be suspicious?"

Feng QiWu: "That is a problem for the future."

Guo DaLu: "But if you're not concerned, why haven't you made your move and killed me yet?"

Feng QiWu: "No one will come into this place anyway. I do not need to be overly anxious."

Guo DaLu: "You have not made your move because you are not able to come to a decision. I know that you have always been a very cautious person. You will not do anything unless you can guarantee your success."

Yan Qi: "If you release him, we promise not to reveal your secret."

The look in Feng QiWu's eyes flickered. He looked like a sly, old fox. The problem with an old fox is that he is too mistrustful. Not only does he suspect others, he also does not trust himself.

Guo DaLu said casually, "You know that I have never been interested in catching thieves. I just did not like being lied to."

They suddenly heard someone laugh and say, "No one ever likes being lied to." It was Golden Lion's voice. While the sound of those words echoed, Golden Lion, GunZi, and the black-clothed man had already walked leisurely into the courtyard.

And at the same time, the four surrounding walls were suddenly illuminated by the fire of raised torches. Several dozen officers stood with the strings on their bows drawn tight and their sabres out of the sheaths. They had completely surrounded the little courtyard.

Was it oil glistening on Feng QiWu's face? Sweat? All of sudden, with a backhand shove, he swung Guo DaLu's body, which weighed more than 100 jin, toward Golden Lion and the black-clothed man. Feng QiWu shot forward like an elastic band. In the blink of an eye, he had seized two sabres and with the move, "Phoenix Spreads its Wings," had leapt onto the roof of the house.

A flash of light reflecting off the sabres was seen and then two officers were tumbling to the ground. Another flash and Feng QiWu's outline could be seen three zhang [*3 zhang = 10 metres] away.

This bandit, who had roamed the martial world for decades and had committed countless crimes, truly did have incredible abilities. Not only did he possess astounding speed, he was very good at taking advantage of opportunities that arose.

This was his first opportunity, and it was also the last opportunity that he would have. Even if the black-clothed man and Golden Lion's lightness kung fu were better than his, they would be obstructed by Guo DaLu, who was hurtling toward them. It was not possible for them to catch up to him.

Suddenly, a low voice was heard saying, "Go back down." Two figures appeared behind the roofline of the house, blocking Feng QiWu's escape route. It seemed that one of the figures merely waved his hand, and Feng QiWu was knocked backward off the roof the same way he had gone

up. Thud! He toppled back into the courtyard, landing right on top of the two officers who had fallen earlier.

The two figures brushed past the roof and landed lightly in the courtyard. One had a cold, expressionless face; the other looked poised and refined, with a graceful air that almost resembled that of a young lady. Wang Dong and Lin TaiPing had arrived.

Guo DaLu had just recovered his balance. Clapping his hands with delight, he grinned and said, "Our Wang Laoda does have certain flair."

Wang Dong: "It wasn't me." If it was not him, it could only be Lin TaiPing. This person who resembled a little girl could actually have such an ability? No one would have guessed it, but yet, there was no other possibility.

By now, Feng QiWu had already been bound so that he looked like a rice dumpling. Golden Lion turned his face to the sky and let out a long breath. "After thirty years of pursuit and hunting, today I have finally captured this old fox."

Guo DaLu: "The loot should be in the roasting room. You can move it out at any time."

Smiling, Golden Lion replied, "This is a time when 'the thief and the loot have been obtained together.' The good deed has been completed as a whole."

Guo DaLu: "There is no need to thank me. If you really want to thank someone, thank him." He pointed at Lin TaiPing, and with a grin, said, "This friend of mine may look a little delicate, but when it comes to drinking wine, he takes it in like he is a large water vat."

Golden Lion shot a look at GunZi. “We should really show our gratitude to them. How do you think we should repay them?”

GunZi replied with a grave expression on his face, “Seize them, seize them all.”

Guo DaLu nearly jumped up as he cried, “What did you just say?”

In a low voice, GunZi said, “These four people were hiding the loot. Even if they are not Feng QiWu’s accomplices, they are also thieves. Bind them and bring them back. I am certain that under harsh torture, they will confess to their crimes.”

Guo DaLu was so livid he felt as if he would explode. But instead, he smiled and said, “I would like to see who has the nerve to come face me.”

GunZi snapped, “You dare resist arrest?”

Wang Dong suddenly spoke up. “No.”

GunZi: “Then submit yourselves to be bound.”

Wang Dong: “We would never resist arrest by real officers. However, you are not true, righteous officers; you are bandits.”

Yan Qi: “They are even more vicious than bandits.”

Wang Dong: “Your motivation behind the effort required to hunt Feng QiWu was not for his capture but rather, for his money.”

Yan Qi: “How much is the monthly wage of a constable? Is it enough to support either of you? Even a general would not

be able to afford to wear the clothes that Mr. Jin is wearing.”

Wang Dong: “What’s more, the cost to hire a professional assassin, like this friend here, is not a small sum,” he said, referring to the black-clothed man. “And naturally, the government would not provide the money for something like that.”

Yan Qi: “But there are lots of stolen loots out there. The world will always be filled with thieves, so naturally, you will always have stolen money available to spend.”

Wang Dong: “Petty crooks that you catch can be brought back to claim your reward and recognition. But big thieves such as Feng QiWu, why not just leave them for yourself?”

Yan Qi: “Capturing such a thief will provide you with enough to live off of for two to three years.”

Wang Dong: “If you let us live, though, you fear there will be a day that your secret is leaked out, so you are thinking you might as well kill us and get rid of any witnesses.

Yan Qi: “Your actions are more vicious than bandits, yet they are all legal. That is what is so incredible.”

Wang Dong: “I have said before, ‘It is fun for wicked people to beat up the wicked. But be careful that it may eventually backfire on you.’ ” As the two of them bantered back and forth, Guo DaLu and Lin TaiPing listened in amazement. Their knowledge could not compare with Yan Qi or Wang Dong when it came to these shady affairs of jianghu that took place in secrecy.

GunZi listened in anger, and he was about to release his rage on them but was stopped by Golden Lion. Waiting until they had finished their conversation, Golden Lion responded with a dry laugh, “Everything you said is correct. I do not

deny any of it." He pointed at GunZi. "This man has a house in Kaifeng, Luoyang, Jinan, and Tianjin, and in each city he has a wife. Do you think he could support all of them on a mere constable's wage?"

GunZi glowered back at him. "Your number of wives is no less than mine."

Guo DaLu retorted, "It's too bad that all your wives are soon going to be widows."

Golden Lion laughed in amusement. "Do you know why I was willing to tell you all of this?" He pointed to the top of the walls that encircled them. "There are ten sets of bows and forty sabres surrounding you. All of them are my brothers who have been through thick and thin with me. Do you think they will let you escape?"

GunZi's lips curled up in a cold smile. "It would be quite unpleasant to die by a rain of arrows piercing your heart."

Golden Lion: "And furthermore, we also have our good friend, Mr. Black, for whom I was willing to part with a large sum of money to hire his services." He chuckled before continuing, "Of course, you must know that his surname is not Black. His long sword should be able to take care of at least two of you. So I would suggest that you be a little more submissive. That way, at least your deaths will be less drawn out."

Guo DaLu snapped, "In your dreams! "

Golden Lion's expression hardened. "Kill him first, and let him be an example to the others! "

The black-clothed man had been standing silently to the side, but he now spoke, asking, "And who are you expecting to do the deed?"

Golden Lion: "You, of course."

GunZi: "For each one that you kill, you get an additional 100 liang of gold."

Black-clothed man: "Fine." In one motion, he reached behind his back, unsheathed his sword, and struck. There was a flash, and the sword had pierced Golden Lion's shoulder.

It was a short sword, not a long one. That sheathe, which was longer than four feet, had contained a sword only one foot seven inches in length.

Golden Lion was normally not an easy opponent, but he had never considered that the black-clothed man would actually turn and strike at him. Even more so, he had never thought the sword within that sheathe would be so short.

In shock, GunZi shouted, "Fire!" He had not even finished his cry before he leapt into the air. But they were not going to let him escape. Guo DaLu and Yan Qi flew up, pressing in on him and forcing him to dart out at an angle. During the whole time that the events unfolded, Wang Dong had been stationary, but now he moved. It was only a single move, but his precision and speed was beyond description. GunZi saw only a blur before his eyes, and then it felt as if there were shackles on wrists.

Cries of fear escaped from the people who had been standing on the walls. Bows and sabres were tossed down as they all fled. The payments they had received for their services were not enough for them to risk their lives.

Now, every eye was on the black-clothed man. No one knew where his loyalties lay.

Golden Lion's eyes smouldered with anger. Through grit teeth, he rasped, "You took my gold, yet you double-crossed me. You are not even worthy to be a dog."

The black-clothed man replied calmly, "I was never your dog."

Golden Lion: "I had long heard that 'Roaming Soul Beneath the Sword,' NanGong Chou was a man of honour, one whose words could be trusted. That is why we were willing to spend a large sum of gold to hire you. But today, things have backfired on me. I, the one who shoots wild geese every day, have finally had my eyes pecked out by one."

Black-clothed man: "You were already blind before."

Golden Lion: "You... could it be that you...?"

Black-clothed man: "Did you think that I really am NanGong Chou?"

Golden Lion: "If you are not NanGong Chou, then who are you?"

Black-clothed man: "You were right. I am one who brings calamity on people. But this time, the ones who are in trouble are actually the two of you."

Golden Lion: "Who are you?! "

Black-clothed man: "Your highest superior, the honourable governor, had known for a long time that there was something suspicious about you. He specifically requested that I investigate the types of shady activities the two of you are involved in."

His words were sharp and abrupt. With a piercing laugh, he continued, "And now, since you have already confessed your

own crimes tonight, I have all the hard evidence that I need. Would you say that this also is an example of when 'the thief and the loot have been obtained together, and the good deed has been completed as a whole?' " Golden Lion glowered at him but did not say another word.

The black-clothed man finally turned his attention upwards. Holding one fist in his other hand respectfully, he smiled and said, "Every profession has its black sheep, and even my organization is not an exception. I hope the next time the four of you see an officer or a constable, you will not think that he is the same as these two."

Guo DaLu smiled in return. "To be honest, I nearly became an officer myself."

Black-clothed man: "Today's success was completely a result of the helping hand that the four of you extended. Now, though, I must take these three people back and report to my superiors."

Yan Qi: "Please, feel free to take your leave."

Guo DaLu gave Feng QiWu a pat on the shoulder. Chuckling, he said to him, "It really should be quite comfortable in prison. At least you know that you will not have to spend a single penny in there." Feng QiWu only rolled his eyes in response. Aside from rolling his eyes, what else could he do?

Black-clothed man: "As for the stolen goods..."

Guo DaLu: "Of course, they should be seized and confiscated into the treasury."

Black-clothed man: "In reality, this case should be considered solved by the four of you. It would stand to reason that you should receive thirty percent of the loot as

payment for your services. If you do not mind travelling the distance with me back to the capital...”

He had not finished his sentence before Wang Dong interrupted, “That is not necessary.” He would rather be beheaded than have to exert himself and travel across a distance just for gold. Guo DaLu, Yan Qi, and Lin TaiPing also refused to go. In their eyes, there were many things in the world that were much more valuable than gold or riches.

Guo DaLu smiled. “Aside from having already brought us a load trouble, that stuff really is no use to us. But if you, sir, would give us the ducks in the roasting room as our reward, we would be extremely grateful.”

Daybreak. The city had returned to its quiet peacefulness. The wind was still blowing and the snow still falling. There are certain things in this world that will never change, no matter what the circumstance. The same holds true for some people.

The ducks had just been roasted to perfection. Guo DaLu grabbed one and tore it open with his hands. He was just getting ready to bite into it when suddenly, seven or eight pieces of jade, all about the diameter of a fingernail, fell out of the duck’s stomach.

Their eyes widened in astonishment. Ripping open another duck, they found pieces of amber inside. Out of the thirty or forty ducks in the room, about ten or so had something concealed inside their stomachs. Blinking with amazement, Yan Qi cried, “I get it!”

Guo DaLu: “You get what?”

Yan Qi: "Feng QiWu had planned to put all the expensive stones and treasures in the stomachs of the ducks and then transport them out of the city. No one would ever have suspected anything. But when we suddenly showed up, he had only hidden a portion of the treasures."

Guo DaLu: "That sounds logical."

Yan Qi chuckled as he replied, "Stop pretending that you didn't know. You had it all figured out long before I did."

Guo DaLu blinked. "I did?"

Yan Qi: "If you didn't, why would you ask for all the ducks?"

Guo DaLu sighed. "If that's what you choose to think, I can't stop you." He flashed a grin. "In any case, they owed us thirty percent as payment anyhow. And taking money that came from a corrupt source cannot be considered dishonest. If we don't spend it, it will be wasted."

Yan Qi stared intently at him. Shaking his head, he said, "Sometimes, I just cannot figure you out."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "I can't figure out: are you really that smart? Or are you really that dense?"

Wang Dong answered for him in a nonchalant tone, "Just when you think that he is a fool, he will prove himself to be extremely intelligent; but when you say that he is intelligent, he becomes a fool." This, too, was a conclusion.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter 8 - Buddha and Stinking Bugs

Money is something that a man cannot live without. Nor can he live without women. Money can bring trouble, but women will bring even more trouble. Aside from these two points, there is something else that money has in common with women: if it comes to you easily, it will certainly disappear just as quickly.

Guo DaLu always thought of himself as a man of principle; in everything he did, he would stay true to his own principles. When it came to eating duck, his principle was, "If there is still meat, do not nibble on the bones; if there is still skin, do not eat the meat."

By now, the duck he was eating had been stripped of its skin. The barbecue duck without its skin was like a woman in her fifties who had been stripped of her clothing, revealing the pudginess underneath. But the duck was also like a twenty year old woman: the more you stripped off of it, the better it looked.

Few people could go from looking at a duck to thinking about women. Guo DaLu could. When his belly was full of wine and his wallet was full of money, everything led him to thoughts of women.

By now, the wine was done and the treasures had been divided four ways. Guo DaLu blinked as a thought suddenly occurred to him. "What... what are your plans?"

Plans? No one had any plans.

Yan Qi fixed his eyes on him as he asked, "Do you have any plans?"

Guo DaLu gazed at the barbecue duck, stripped of its skin. "We've been idle for a long time now. It's about time for us to starting moving about; otherwise our bones may start rusting."

Yan Qi: "Our bones aren't like yours, which start itching once you've got a bit of money in your pocket."

Guo DaLu sighed before laughing and saying, "So I'm a glutton for punishment. But I want to go move about a bit."

Yan Qi: "Did you want to go alone?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Yan Qi gave a cold laugh. "I've always known that some people only need their friends when they are poor. Once they have money, the excuses start coming out."

Guo DaLu glared back at him. "Haven't you ever done something alone before?"

Yan Qi turned his head away from him. "If you want to leave, then go. No one is stopping you."

Guo DaLu stood up to go but then sat back down again. Smiling, he soothed, "I just want to go out by myself for a day or so. We'll see each other again tomorrow night." They ignored him. "Now that Mai LaoGuang has been arrested, there isn't a single good restaurant here anymore. I know that inside Xiancheng [*Xian city], there is a restaurant called Kui Yuan Guan that is supposed to be pretty good. It's a good thing Xiancheng isn't very far from here. How about we meet up there tomorrow? ... My treat."

Still no one paid attention to him.

Guo DaLu started getting anxious. “Am I not allowed to have just one day to myself to go out?”

Wang Dong finally responded by rolling his eyes and asking, “Who said you’re not allowed?”

Guo DaLu: “So will you go tomorrow?”

Wang Dong: “Could you not just buy the food and wine from Kui Yuan Guan and bring it back here to treat us?”

Guo DaLu: “Could you please not be so lazy? You should go out anyway and buy a few pieces of clothing to change into. If you keep wearing the outfit that you have on now, you’re going to start growing mould.”

Wang Dong suddenly stood up and walked slowly toward the door.

Guo DaLu: “Where are you going?”

Wang Dong: “Going to Mai LaoGuang’s bed.”

Guo DaLu: “To do what?”

Wang Dong sighed. “What else can you do on a bed? To go sleep, of course. When you get on a bed, do you do anything else?”

Guo DaLu laughed in reply. He actually was thinking of doing something else, and it did involve being on a bed. He stood up and smiled, saying, “It will actually be a good thing if Wang Dong stays the night there.

He is going to Xiancheng tomorrow, anyways, so that saves him a trip home and back out again.” Casting a glance at Yan Qi, he asked, “Are you going to go with Wang Laoda tomorrow?”

Lin TaiPing nodded in response. Yan Qi, though, casually replied, "I'm going with you today."

Guo DaLu paused in shock. "But... I..."

Yan Qi glowered back at him. "You what? So it is true that now that you have money, you don't want your friends anymore?"

All throughout their trek down the hill, Guo DaLu could only sigh. Yan Qi cast glances at him out of the corner of his eye. "What is wrong with you? Are you feeling unwell?"

With a pained expression on his face, Guo DaLu replied, "I think I ate something bad. My stomach isn't feeling very well."

Yan Qi said coldly, "I suspect it's not your stomach that is upset." He let out an unexpected laugh. "Actually, I know exactly why you're upset."

Guo DaLu: "You do?"

A sly expression filled Yan Qi's eyes. "Anyone with a little experience in the world understands the rule, 'gamble together but visit prostitutes alone.' Of course I know what you intend to do."

Guo DaLu was speechless for quite a while, and then, could only respond with a wry smile. "You think that the reason I was trying to get rid of you guys was to go find women?"

Yan Qi: "Did you not have those intentions?"

Guo DaLu did not reply.

Yan Qi: "To be frank, I insisted on going with you because I wanted you to bring me along to those places. I know that, in regards to these matters, you must have plenty of experience, right?"

"Mmm..." Guo DaLu responded evasively. He suddenly fell into a violent fit of coughing.

Yan Qi: "Dashing and suave young men like you must know which places will have the best girls." Sneaking a glance at Guo DaLu out of the corner of his eye, he continued, "And since we're all friends here, of course you wouldn't mind pointing me in the right direction."

Red was creeping up Guo DaLu's cheeks. "Of course, of course."

Yan Qi: "So which way are we heading now?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course we'll... um... go into the city first and then decide."

Yan Qi gave another little laugh. "You really should have brought Wang Laoda and Lin TaiPing along too. It would be an eye-opener for them. I really don't understand why you were trying to keep it a secret from them."

Guo DaLu was not trying to keep this secret from anyone. He did not think that going out to find women was something to be embarrassed about. Not finding a woman was what was really embarrassing.

What he was trying to hide was the fact that he did not know where to find women. He had never before had money, so he had not bothered to look. That was why he needed to think so hard now.

They were fast approaching Xiancheng. The instant they entered the city, Yan Qi asked, "Now where should we go? Which road do we take?"

Within ten steps, there will always be fragrant grass. [* a phrase that means, beautiful girls will always be nearby] Guo DaLu coughed a few times. "It doesn't matter which road we take."

Yan Qi: "It doesn't matter?"

Guo DaLu: "All four roads will have women."

Yan Qi laughed. "I know that all four roads will have women, but there are many types of women. The question is, which road will lead to that type of woman that you're looking for?"

Guo DaLu wiped the sweat off of his forehead. Pointing at a tea house to the side of the road, he said, "Go there and wait for me. I'll go search and bring them back to you."

Yan Qi blinked at him. "Why do I have to wait here? Can't we go together?"

Guo DaLu answered with a serious look on his face, "You don't understand how it all works. Those places are very secretive. The more hidden they are, the more exciting it is inside. But if the girls see a stranger, they won't be willing to come out."

Yan Qi heaved a sigh. "Alright. You're the old horse that knows the way, so no matter what, I have to listen to you."

Guo DaLu could finally breathe easy again as he watched Yan Qi walk into the tea house. Yan Qi suddenly turned around and shouted, "I'll be waiting for you here. Don't try to run off!"

Guo DaLu hollered back in reply, "Of course I won't run off!" He really had no intentions of sneaking away. All he wanted to do was figure out what route would lead him to women and what to expect there so that Yan Qi would be in awe of his knowledge.

"If a dashing and suave young man like me can't find those places, Yan Qi is going to laugh at me, and I won't hear the end of it for three to five years." Guo DaLu picked up his pace. He walked to the end of the street, then turned and continued onto the next one.

But this street was exactly the same as the last one: there was a tea house and a pawn shop; there were men, and of course, there were women. "But where can I find that type of women?" But no matter how hard he searched, none of the women looked right. They all looked like proper, respectable women.

"Women in that business don't have a sign on their face that announces what they do." He stood on the side of the road for a long time, lost in thought, as he encouraged and reassured himself, "I have money, so why should I worry that I won't find women?"

He planned on buying himself a new set of clothes first before he did anything else. "People need to wear clothing and Buddha [statue] needs to wear gold." Dressing up elegantly would definitely score extra points with the women.

What was strange, though, was that it also seemed difficult to find a shop that sold clothing. After much hard searching, he finally came across one. There was already someone in the shop selecting outfits. It was Yan Qi.

What was strange, though, was that it also seemed difficult to find a shop that sold clothing. After much hard searching, he finally came across one. There was already someone in the shop selecting outfits. It was Yan Qi. "The guy didn't wait for me in the tea house like I told him to."

He could hear Yan Qi's voice from within the shop, laughing as he said, "Give me the best looking outfit. Price is not an issue. I have a date with a beauty today, and I want the clothes I wear to be impressive."

Guo DaLu's brow furrowed. "Could it be that the guy has found his way already?" Guo DaLu couldn't help feeling annoyed and amused at the same time as he stared at the radiant glow on Yan Qi's face. "Well, if you're not keeping your side of the agreement, I don't have to keep my word either, so you can't say that I'm sneaking off."

He decided that he did not need to change his clothes and instead, would take advantage of the moment to lose Yan Qi. "The ladies like good looks; the owner of the brothel likes money. I have both good looks and money. It shouldn't matter whether I change into nicer clothes or not."

The street he was on also had a tea house. A man carrying a bird cage on his palm was strolling out its doors. He was not old, but there was no spark in his eyes and his face was rather pale. He looked worn-out with that type of exhaustion that anyone looking at him would know what he had been doing the night before.

Guo DaLu approached him quickly, and, holding one fist in the other hand, smiled pleasantly as he greeted, "My surname is Guo. I know you don't know me, nor do I know you. But now we've met, so we know each other." He was always direct and to the point.

Fortunately, the man was not inexperienced in the real world. Pausing only briefly in surprise, he quickly recovered and answered with a smile, "Friend Guo, how may I be of assistance?"

Guo DaLu: "It would be a waste of one's youth if one does not spend it romancing."

The man replied knowingly, "I understand. Guo xiong [*xiong literally means "brother" but can mean "friend" at times] is looking for some 'romance'."

Guo DaLu: "Exactly. But unfortunately, I can't seem to find the way there."

The man laughed and said, "Well, Guo xiong, you have found the right person. But if you want 'romance,' you must have money. If you don't have money, you will be beat up and thrown out the door."

Guo DaLu was thrown out the door. He suddenly realized that the ladies didn't want good looks; the ladies also wanted money.

Guo DaLu was not one who was easily picked on, and he most definitely was not one who would take a beating without putting up a fight. But how could he allow himself to fight with that type of woman?

His shoulder had been bitten a couple of times, and a large goose egg was swelling up on his head where he had been hit. Right now, one of his hands was massaging that lump while the other hand was feeling inside his pocket. The pocket was even emptier than his belly was. He was certain he had placed his share of the treasures inside that pocket, but now it was nowhere to be found.

The duck skin he had eaten that morning had already been digested, and the wine he had drank had turned into sweat. By nightfall, even his sweat had long dried up.

Guo DaLu found a deserted temple. Sitting in front of the altar, he stared up, deep in thought, at the clay Buddhist idol. It seemed that the statue was also gazing down at him in contemplation.

His plan had been perfect: he would first eat a nice, comfortable meal before taking a relaxing bath. He had even imagined the glorious scene where a soft pair of hands was scrubbing his back.

But what about now?

Now, the only thing that was scrubbing his back was, not just one, but many stinking bugs. The rush cushion he was sitting on appeared to be the headquarters of those bugs. It felt like the entire world's bugs were gathered there and, one faction at a time, were moving into his clothes, ready to feast on his back.

As, one blow after another, his palm slapped down on his back, he wished that he could just die and end all this misery with one slap. "Was I truly fated to live a life of poverty? Can I not just have one day where I don't have to endure hunger?"

He suddenly thought about all the advantages of having friends. "Why did I want to come out alone? Why did I choose to lose Yan Qi?" His hunger intensified as he thought about Yan Qi, who was probably happily eating and drinking away at the moment. He was so famished he could nearly swallow those stinking bugs. "It is true that one should never leave his friends behind.

No matter what he wants to do, he should still always stay with them. What other things of this world are more worthy to be cherished than friends?" Guo DaLu had suddenly become emotional and appreciative of friendship. This happens to anyone who is in a state of hunger and poverty.

Fortunately, he was consoled as he knew he would see them again tomorrow. All he hoped for now was that the time would pass quickly – the quicker the better.

"I miss them so much, but they have probably all forgotten about me. I bet Wang Dong was snoring away long ago. As for Yan Qi, maybe he's laughing and flirting with that beauty of his right at this instant."

As his thoughts turned in that direction, he could not help but let out a long sigh. He suddenly realized that he was a person who truly cherished friendship, that he valued his friends more than they valued him.

And so, his time of consolation was also mixed with feelings of sadness. In his jumbled emotional state, he temporarily forgot about his situation and drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke early the next morning, Guo DaLu decided he would go to Kui Yuan Guan to wait for his friends. He had decided that he would first feast on a large meal there, then wait for his friends to come pay the bill. He had even planned to order the best dishes available to compensate for all the suffering he had endured the previous night.

He had practically forgotten what the cause of hardships had been and felt that everyone should make it up to him. This was probably because his hunger was making him lightheaded and not able to think clearly. To him, it seemed as if his plight was a result of all the sacrifices he had made for his friends. He felt extremely sorry for himself.

Unfortunately, the owner of Kui Yuan Guan did not feel the same way. When Guo DaLu arrived, not only was the door not open, even the windows were shut. Were they deliberately trying to spite him? When someone is famished to the point that he is ready to faint, his logic is usually flawed and unreasonable.

He was just about ready to bang on the door when suddenly, he felt a hand pat him on the shoulder and heard a voice chirp, "Good morning." Yan Qi stood there dressed in a new set of clothes, a radiant glow on his face. He looked like someone whose belly was full and who had had a night of good rest.

Irritated, Guo DaLu snapped at him, "Good morning? You think it's still early? If you were still sleeping, the sun would be shining on your buttocks already! "

Yan Qi laughed. "A night of love is worth a thousand gold pieces. Why didn't you lie a little longer in your paradise of beautiful women and let the sun shine on you a bit more?"

Guo DaLu: "There were too many stinking bugs there."

Yan Qi? "Bugs? Why would there be that many bugs in a nice brothel?"

Guo DaLu realized that he had let the wrong information slip out from his lips. Coughing a couple of times to cover up his blunder, he smiled and said, "They weren't really stinking bugs. She just couldn't keep her hands off me, and her hands were crawling all over my body. It was even more annoying than having bugs crawling on me."

Yan Qi blinked, then shook his head and sighed, "The most difficult thing to accept is a beautiful woman's love. You were in the midst of good fortune, yet you didn't even know

to enjoy it. I wish I could find a few ‘stinking bugs’ who are willing to crawl on me, but I couldn’t.” Guo DaLu threw his head back in laughter.

He tried to make his laugh sound extra cheery, but instead, the noise that came out sounded more like something that would come from a donkey’s throat – a hungry donkey’s throat.

Yan Qi eyed him up and down a few times. “Does your stomach not feel well again? You must have eaten too much.”

Guo DaLu: “Mmm...”

Chuckling, Yan Qi said, “Since that girl liked you so much, after, she must have personally cooked some good dishes for you to eat to help you regain some of your energy.”

Guo DaLu gave him a cold stare. “And since when did you become such an expert in these matters?”

Yan Qi sighed again as he answered, “I could never have your good fortune.”

Guo DaLu: “Where did you go last night?”

Yan Qi: “You should be ashamed to even ask. I waited forever for you in the tea house, but I didn’t catch even a glimpse of your shadow. So all I could do was wander around like a lonely, unwanted ghost. I nearly did not even find a place to sleep.”

Guo DaLu’s teeth grated together in fury, but yet he could not expose Yan Qi’s lie. Forcing a chuckle, he replied, “It’s your own fault you didn’t have enough patience to wait a little longer. So because of you, I had to manage several girls at once. It was such a pain!”

Yan Qi shook his head, moaning and sighing continuously, as if he regretted his mistake incredibly. Guo DaLu's spirits were lifted a little, so he added in a kinder tone, "You really don't need to be too disappointed. You will always have your chance next time."

There was this really cute girl who was not only pretty but gentle and considerate as well. You didn't even need to ask for something, and she would already know what you wanted and would prepare it for you."

Yan Qi listened with his eyes wide. "If that's the case, she is practically like a merciful clay Buddha who rescues the needy."

Guo DaLu paused in surprise. "Clay Buddha? Where did you suddenly get a clay Buddha from?" His mind was whisked back to the temple and the clay Buddhist statue from the previous night."

Yan Qi gave a little laugh. "I meant that type of female 'Buddha' who specializes in 'rescuing' men."

In relief, Guo DaLu let out the breath he had been holding. The heart of a thief [*thief in this context is meant to encompass someone who knows he has done something wrong] always responds with more guilt.

Yan Qi: "So, what special dishes did your female Buddha make for you to eat this morning?"

Guo DaLu swallowed his saliva hungrily as he answered nonchalantly, "Oh, it was really nothing special. Just some yan wo [*swallows nest that is edible and considered a delicacy], chicken soup, noodles, baozi [*steamed buns with some sort of filling], ham, and eggs."

He wished he could name every food that he wanted to eat right then. Even if he couldn't eat them, at the very least, hearing their names might lessen his hunger. Alas, though, he had to stop. If he continued any further down his list, he would start salivating in front of Yan Qi.

Yan Qi sighed again. "It seems that not only do you have good fortune with the ladies, your mouth also has good fortune when it comes to food. But I'm so hungry I'm about to starve to death. I have to find a place to eat."

He had not even finished speaking before Guo DaLu asked eagerly, "Where are you going to go? I'll go with you."

Yan Qi: "Oh, there's no need. I know you're already full. I would feel bad asking you to come along."

Guo DaLu was getting so anxious he could barely contain it, and he was just about to tell the truth. Luckily for him, Kui Yuan Guan's door suddenly opened a crack. A head peered from around the door at them, the eyelids only half open, as if the person was never fully awake. With a lazy expression on his face, the person cast a sideways glance at them and said casually, "Our little restaurant here has food for you to eat. Dear patrons, why would you forfeit something so close to find a place further away?"

Yan Qi and Guo DaLu's faces broke into large grins.

"Wang Dong! "

Guo DaLu could not help but laugh. "You are always so mysterious in your ways. When did you arrive here? When did you become one of Kui Yuan Guan's employees?"

Wang Dong: "It is a rare occurrence to be treated to a meal by our Guo Dashao [*dashao = young master]. Don't you think it would have been a huge loss to me if I overslept and

missed this opportunity? So instead, I decided to come here last night and stay the night. It saved me a trip in the morning, too.”

Yan Qi let out a laugh. “What a great idea. Everything Wang Laoda does is well thought out. I’m sure our host is extremely touched that he has the privilege of treating such a sincere guest to a meal.”

Guo DaLu felt victimized and miserable but yet, could not say anything. He could only respond with a dry laugh, “Haha. I am so tremendously touched. In fact, I’m so frigging extremely touched.”

Wang Dong: “You don’t have to feel touched quite yet. Wait until we all start eating; that’s when you should feel touched.”

Yan Qi: “That’s right. We’ll make sure he’s so frigging touched he’ll be shedding tears.”

Kui Yuan Guan was a relatively larger place. In addition to its main level, which already had seventeen or eighteen tables, it had an upstairs level. At night, the tables were pushed together, and the staff would lay out some bedding on top to sleep. The seven staff members now were slowly arising, the sleep still heavy in their eyes. One by one, they greeted Wang Dong in a respectful, yet at the same time, familiar tone of voice.

“Wang Dage [*dage = big brother, in a respectful tone], the people you were waiting for have arrived?”

“Hurry; come take care of Wang Dage’s guests.”

Guo DaLu’s eyes were bulging in amazement. He was tempted to ask Wang Dong when he had become these people’s dage. He suddenly realized that not only were

Wang Dong's ways mysterious, he also had a couple tricks up his sleeve when it came to making friends. He knew that he, himself, would never be able to befriend a restaurant's employees.

Yan Qi, though, could not control his urge and asked, "Did you used to come here often?"

Wang Dong: "This is my first time here."

Yan Qi's eyes also widened in surprise, and he could not help feeling admiration for Wang Dong. In one night, he had earned the respect of the restaurant's entire staff. That was not a simple feat.

Wang Dong: "Feel free to order whatever you want to eat. I'll tell them to go start the fires in the kitchen."

Yan Qi: "I'll have a bowl of noodles with chicken and three eggs cooked in the soup. Also, bring me a couple of pan-fried spareribs. If there is fish and other meats, bring me some of that as well."

Wang Dong: "I will have an order of the exact same. Now, what will it be for Guo Dashao?"

Hungrily, Guo DaLu swallowed his saliva again. "I'll ..."

The words had not even left his lips before Yan Qi interrupted, "He doesn't want anything. He has eaten so much already he is stuffed to the brim."

Guo DaLu was fretting and fuming at the same time. He was so angry his teeth were chattering and his hands were shaking. He would have liked nothing more than to stuff his fist into that mouth that was being so lippy.

Yan Qi's stared back at him innocently, his eyes sparkling as if they were secretly laughing. All of a sudden, he asked, "Where's Lin TaiPing? Has he arrived yet?"

Wang Dong: "He's here. He is still fast asleep upstairs."

Yan Qi: "I never would have known that he has such a strong talent for sleeping as well."

But there was no one upstairs, not even the shadow of a ghost.

But there was no one upstairs, not even the shadow of a ghost.

Several tables had been pushed together in the corner of the room. Blankets were on top of the tables, but there was nobody in the blankets.

Yan Qi: "Where is he?"

Wang Dong had also paused in shock. "When I went downstairs, he was still sleeping here. Where could he have disappeared to?"

Yan Qi: "You didn't see him go downstairs?" Wang Dong shook his head as he fixed his stare upon a window.

Yan Qi chuckled. "The lad's way of doing things is also a bit mysterious. No one is telling him to pay the tab so why sneak off?" His eyes followed Wang Dong's gaze. There were a total of eight windows upstairs, but only that window in particular was open. "Was that window open a little while ago?"

Wang Dong: "No. I do not like sleeping with windows open because I am afraid I may catch a cold." He walked slowly over to the open window. Directly below the window was Kui

Yuan Guan's back door, which faced a brook. A small bridge was built over the brook.

The water was dirty and had a foul smell, and the bridge was old and crumbling. But the sun had just risen. Its soft light shone upon the water. The mist of dawn had not yet dissipated. A gentle breeze whispered among the drooping leaves of the willow trees growing along the bank.

The faint cry of a chicken's call carried on the wind. Looking at the scene, it almost suggested something from a poem or a painting. The setting was spoiled, though, by a married woman, squatting beside the brook with a child on her back, washing a toilet receptacle.

Yan Qi wrinkled his brow, then wrinkled his nose as well before shouting down, "Excuse me, Madam. Someone just jumped down from this window a moment ago. Did you happen to notice him?"

The woman lifted her head briefly to glare at him before lowering it back down again. "It is so early in the morning still. Could it be this person saw a ghost?" Seeing that he got nowhere with his question, Yan Qi gave a wry smile. "Where could he have gone? Maybe he has fallen into the brook and drowned?"

Guo DaLu's temper was rising as he felt his stomach getting emptier and emptier by the instant, and he felt like picking a fight with someone. Scowling, he said, "That's one less annoyance if he did drown. My only fear is that he didn't drown."

Wang Dong looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Why does this guy have such a flaming temper so early in the morning? Did he not release most of his fiery energy last night?"

Yan Qi sniggered, "Someone had both stinking bugs and a female Buddha last night. No matter how big his fire was, it should have been completely channelled out of him."

Wang Dong: "Female Buddha? Bugs? Could it be that he slept in an abandoned temple last night? If that is the case, he would have been better off to come here and sleep on some tables instead."

Guo DaLu's whole face flushed red in that instant. Fortunately, a waiter was coming up the stairs carrying two bowls of noodles – two very large bowls of noodles. There were also two big plates of fish and spareribs on the side. Waves of delicious smells wafted up into Guo DaLu's nose with the steam of the dishes. How could Guo DaLu bear it?

Guo DaLu suddenly focused intently at something under the table, as if there were several little monsters putting on a performance there. Even though Yan Qi and Wang Dong's mouths were chewing on noodles, their eyes could not help but follow his gaze under the table. Seizing this opportunity, Guo DaLu's arm flew forward towards the biggest sparerib and tried to snatch it up.

But his hand had just touched the sparerib when, all of a sudden, a pair of chopsticks was flying horizontally towards him, and "bam!" solidly struck the back of his hand.

Yan Qi had been looking sideways at him. Laughing, he said, "You've just eaten seventeen or eighteen different dishes and you still want to steal other people's meat. Could it be that you are really a hungry ghost reincarnated?"

That guy truly was born with a pair of sneaky, thieving eyes.

Guo DaLu's face grew red as he withdrew his arm and muttered, "Can't even tell good from bad intentions. I was

being nice and shooing away a fly for him, and he turns around and accuses me.”

Yan Qi: “Such a cold day, where would a fly come from?”

Wang Dong: “There may not be any flies, but at least there are a few stinking bugs.”

Guo DaLu didn’t know what the problem was with these two today. At every moment possible, they were trying to harass him; every instant available, they were acting against him. The only thing he could do was ignore him. For a long while, he stared off into space.

Suddenly, he grinned and asked, “Do you know what I am thinking right now?” No one answered because their mouths were stuffed with meat. Guo DaLu had to answer the question himself. “I am thinking that this bowl of noodles must taste pretty good.”

Yan Qi swallowed a mouthful of the noodle’s soup to help wash the noodles into his belly before replying with a sweet smile, “You are right. We rarely get to eat such tasty noodles.”

Guo DaLu: “Do you know why that bowl of noodles tastes particularly different?”

Yan Qi blinked. “Why?”

Guo DaLu replied nonchalantly: “Because that bowl of noodles was made using water from the brook. Water used to wash toilet buckets will naturally taste particularly different.”

Yan Qi, surprisingly, showed no reaction but instead, laughed and said, “Even eating noodles made from foot-

washing water would be better than being starved and not having any noodles to eat.”

Guo DaLu was silent for a long moment. Suddenly, he jumped up, spread his arms, and shouted, “I want to eat too! I must eat! Anyone who doesn’t let me eat, I will fight him with my life!”

Lin TaiPing sat, staring in silence.

He had returned long ago, sitting in silence the whole time, as if he was waiting for someone to ask him, “Why did you suddenly disappear? Where did you go? What did you do?”

But no one asked him; it was as if he had never even left. So, he had to reveal the answer himself. He first cast a glance at Guo DaLu before saying in a low tone, “I just saw someone; you will never guess who it was.”

As expected, Guo DaLu could not contain his curiosity and asked, “Do I know that person?”

Lin TaiPing: “Even if you don’t know him, at the very least, you have seen him before.”

Guo DaLu: “Who is he?”

Lin TaiPing: “I do not know who he is either because I don’t know him.”

Guo DaLu paused, then smiled wryly as he said, “What country’s language is this person speaking? Which one of you understands what he is saying?”

Lin TaiPing paid no attention to him as he continued, “Even though I don’t know him, I recognize his clothes.”

Guo DaLu could not help asking again, "What clothes are those?"

Lin TaiPing: "Black clothes."

Guo DaLu guffawed. "The entire street is filled with people wearing black clothing. You can choose a place at random and find several dozen of them."

Lin TaiPing: "Aside from his clothes, I also recognized that person's sword."

Guo DaLu finally caught on to something. He immediately asked, "What type of sword?"

Lin TaiPing: "A sword, one foot seven inches in length, paired with a four foot long sheathe."

Guo DaLu exhaled loudly. "When did you see him?"

Lin TaiPing: "When the two of you arrived."

Guo DaLu laughed unexpectedly. "Do you think this situation is very strange?"

Lin TaiPing: "You do not believe it is strange?"

Guo DaLu: "He was supposed to come to Xiancheng to report on the completion of his mission. It would be strange if you did not see him here."

Lin TaiPing: "He was supposed to hand Golden Lion, GunZi, Feng QiWu, and the stolen goods over to the yamen [*a government office], correct?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Lin TaiPing: "But no one within the yamen has heard anything about this. In the last couple of days, no prisoners

have been brought into custody.”

Guo DaLu finally felt a little alarmed. “How do you know?”

Lin TaiPing: “I have already gone to the yamen and inquired about it.”

Guo DaLu thought for a moment. “Perhaps he is going to transport the prisoners to a different place to be put in custody.”

Lin TaiPing : “There are no prisoners.”

Guo DaLu frowned. “What do you mean, ‘no prisoners?’ ”

Lin TaiPing: “ ‘No prisoners’ means Golden Lion, GunZi, and Feng QiWu have completely disappeared; even the loot is gone. I followed his trail all the way to where he is staying. He was the only one there.”

Guo DaLu paused in shock.

Yan Qi and Wang Dong were also silent.

Lin TaiPing grabbed the wine in front of Guo DaLu and guzzled it down until there was nothing left. Nonchalantly, he said, “Now do you think it is a little strange?”

Guo DaLu: “Indeed.”

End of Chapter 8

Chapter 9 - To Kill or Be Killed

The tables had all been separated, the cotton blankets stored. It was fast approaching the time when Kui Yuan Guan would start seating its patrons. But right then, on the upstairs level, there was only the four of them sitting motionless, like four wooden statues – wooden statues that knew how to drink wine.

The wine level in the jug was subsiding like an ebbing tide. They filled their own cups and drank in silence. No one addressed anyone else.

Then, as if they had prearranged it, Yan Qi, Wang Dong, and Guo DaLu all started laughing loudly at the same time.

Even if they were idiots, by now, they would have figured out that they had been deceived. The black-clothed man was not a government officer at all and definitely not a secret agent sent by some honourable governor to investigate Golden Lion and GunZi. He, too, was a bad guy who went after other bad guys.

To be fooled by someone so badly should have been infuriating, but they thought it was hilarious.

Yan Qi pointed at Guo DaLu, and with mirth in his voice, said, “Wang Laoda’s conclusion was completely correct: when it is time for you to be intelligent, you in fact are a fool. Not just a fool, but an idiot, a complete idiot.

Guo DaLu pointed his finger back at him and chortled, “What about you? You weren’t much smarter than me.”

Lin TaiPing had been watching them the whole time. Waiting until their laughter had abated, he asked, “Are you done

laughing?”

Guo DaLu was still breathing heavily, and he struggled to hold back his chuckles. “Not really, but I am too tired to keep laughing.”

Lin TaiPing: “Do you find the situation very amusing?”

Wang Dong suddenly rolled his eyes and answered back, “What else can you do if you don’t laugh? Cry?”

This was their philosophy in life. They were able to laugh, they knew how to laugh, and they were not afraid of laughing. Laughter not only fills you with joy, but it can also strengthen your courage and love for life. “Those who laugh are blessed because it is in them that life is lived to the fullest.”

But Lin TaiPing looked as if he could not make himself laugh.

Guo DaLu: “Why won’t you laugh as we are doing?”

Lin TaiPing: “If laughter could solve the issue, for certain, I would be laughing even harder than you.”

Guo DaLu: “Even if laughter cannot solve anything, at the very least, it will not add to your worries.” He chuckled again before continuing, “Plus, when you learn to use laughter in facing the things of life, gradually you will discover that there is no problem life can present to you that cannot be resolved.

Lin TaiPing: “No matter how cheerful your laughter is, it doesn’t change the fact that you have been deceived.”

Guo DaLu: “Even if you don’t laugh, you still have been deceived. If that’s the case, why wouldn’t you laugh?”

Lin TaiPing did not say anything.

Guo DaLu: "What is it that is troubling you?"

Yan Qi: "And why are you so concerned about this particular circumstance?"

Lin TaiPing was quiet for quite a while. "Because that person is NanGong Chou."

Yan Qi: "How do you know?"

Lin TaiPing: "I just know."

Guo DaLu: "And what connection do you have to NanGong Chou?"

Lin TaiPing: "No connection. It is because I have no connection to him that I need to ..."

Guo DaLu: "You need to what?"

Lin TaiPing: "I need to kill him."

Guo DaLu looked first at Yan Qi, then Wang Dong. "Did you hear what he just said?"

Wang Dong did not move. Yan Qi nodded.

Guo DaLu: "This lad says he wants to kill someone."

Wang Dong still did not move. Yan Qi nodded again.

Guo DaLu turned his head to look over at Lin TaiPing, whose face was expressionless. "You saw him awhile ago?"

Lin TaiPing: "Yes."

Guo DaLu suddenly laughed and asked, "Why didn't you kill him then?"

Still, no hint of emotion showed on Lin TaiPing's face; it seemed as if he was wearing a mask – a cold, iron mask. It was quite frightful to look at. He articulated each word, "I already killed him."

The jug was filled with wine again because Wang Dong had instructed, "When you see that our wine jug is empty, come over and fill it up." The employees of Kui Yuan Guan were very compliant with Wang Dong's wishes. At that moment, everyone was staring wide-eyed at the wine jug. Guo DaLu suddenly laughed aloud. "You aren't supposed to use your eyes to drink."

Yan Qi: "My mouth is really busy right now."

Guo DaLu: "Busy doing what?"

Yan Qi: "Busy swallowing the questions that I want to ask back into my stomach."

Patrons were gradually arriving; the restaurant was not an appropriate place for further discussion. Guo DaLu picked up his wine cup, then set it down again. "It is seldom that Guo Dashao is a host and treats his guests..."

Yan Qi: "This time, you have been let off easy. Let's go."

Lin TaiPing was the first to rise to his feet. Surprisingly, Wang Dong also stood up. Guo DaLu stretched his arm out in, his hand in front of their faces, blocking their way.

Looking at him, Wang Dong asked, "What would you like to do? Did you want me to give you a palm reading?"

Guo DaLu forced a laugh. "There's no need. I know I was destined to live a life of poverty. The worst part is, every

time I would like to treat some friends, the money inside my pocket will mysteriously find a way to fly away by itself."

Wang Dong: "You want to borrow money from me to pay the tab?"

Guo DaLu cleared his throat a few times. "Well, you know, my activities last night were quite expensive."

Wang Dong had wanted to laugh in response, but after one glance at Lin TaiPing, he could only give a sigh. "You have come to the wrong person."

In a tone full of detest, Guo DaLu asked, "You've completely spent your money?"

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "You... how did you spend it?"

Wang Dong: "My activities last night were very expensive as well."

Guo DaLu: "What were you doing?"

Wang Dong: "There is only one activity in this world that is more expensive than finding women: gambling."

Guo DaLu: "You lost all your money? Who did you lose it to?"

Wang Dong: "The employees of this restaurant."

Guo DaLu paused for a long while in astonishment. He could not help laughing as he responded, "No wonder they are so submissive to you. Every shop's employees are especially nice to idiot squanderers of money."

Wang Dong: "I am not the only idiot squanderer here."

Guo DaLu: "Who else?" Wang Dong looked over at Lin TaiPing, then Yan Qi. Guo DaLu leapt up in surprise. "You guys lost all your money too?"

No one said anything. Their silence was an admission.

Guo DaLu collapsed back onto his seat. Forcing a smile, he said in a sickly tone, "If that is the case, all the employees here suddenly made a fortune."

Wang Dong: "They will not be rich for long. Sooner or later, they will lose the money to someone else."

Guo DaLu paced around as he nodded. "True. What comes easily will go easily; how it came is how it will go."

Wang Dong: "But at least we have contributed to mankind and society."

Guo DaLu: "What type of contribution?"

Wang Dong: "The faster money circulates, the more prosperous the economy will be. As a result, mankind can progress."

Guo DaLu thought this over for a moment. Smiling cynically, he said, "Your words always appear to have some logic behind them."

Wang Dong: "That is why you don't need to be upset either."

Guo DaLu: "What would I be upset about? I didn't lose any..."

Wang Dong: "Regretfully, we lost your share of the money along with everything else." Guo DaLu froze in shock. "Even if the mud Buddha statue in the abandoned temple does

sleep with people, it certainly would not charge a fee for the service.”

As he listened, Guo DaLu’s eyes slowly grew rounder and rounder. “You all knew?! You had been conspiring the whole time, hadn’t you? ... The sneaky, little thief who stole from me, it was...?” He suddenly stabbed a finger at Yan Qi’s nose and cried, “It was you! ”

Yan Qi: “You are correct.”

Guo DaLu seized him by the collar. Gritting his teeth, he asked, “Why would you do such a thing?” Yan Qi did not reply, but his face showed a faint red color.

Wang Dong: “It was for your own good. He did not want his friend to get a venereal disease.”

Slowly, Guo DaLu’s fingers released Yan Qi’s clothing. He sank back to his seat, his hand rubbing his scalp as he muttered under his breath.

“Oh Heaven! ... Oh Heaven! Why did you make me befriend such a person?” He suddenly jumped up again and, through clenched teeth, demanded, “If you knew that all four of our wallets were emptied, why would you still sit here feasting and drinking away?”

Wang Dong: “To make you happy.”

Guo DaLu could not contain his voice as he cried incredulously, “Make me happy?”

Wang Dong: “An individual is always especially happy when he is entertaining guests, right?”

Guo DaLu held his head in his hands as he moaned, “Yes yes yes! I am so happy, so frigging happy I might as well just die

right now.”

A waiter suddenly walked over to them and said, “Wang Dage, you need not fret about paying the bill. The tab has already been cleared.”

Guo DaLu sighed. “I never would have expected it, but at least there is one person with a kind heart in this place.”

The waiter’s face grew pink with embarrassment. Smiling, he said, “I had planned on paying the bill for Wang Dage, but unfortunately, someone stole this opportunity from me and paid it first.”

Wang Dong: “Who?”

The waiter answered, “The patron sitting in that corner over there.” He turned around to point out the kind person to them. Dishes of food and wine were still on the table in the corner, but there was no one to be seen.

The waiter answered, “The patron sitting in that corner over there.” He turned around to point out the kind person to them. Dishes of food and wine were still on the table in the corner, but there was no one to be seen.

Guo DaLu was the last in the group as they got up to leave. He took a few steps, then turned around again. Patting the shoulder of the employee who was showing them out the door, he said, “There is something I would like to ask you.”

Employee: “Please ask.”

Guo DaLu: “How are you planning to spend all that money you won?”

Employee: “I do not plan on spending it.” Guo DaLu stared incredulously at him, as if a saint had suddenly appeared

before his eyes. The employee continued, "I plan on using it as my gambling principal to win even more. I have had quite a bit of luck at the gambling table lately."

Guo DaLu continued to stare at him. Suddenly, he burst into laughter, doubling over and laughing so hard he nearly fell down the stairs. He gave another pat on the employee's shoulder and commended him, "Great idea. That is what we need in order for mankind to advance. On behalf of all the people in the world, I thank you."

The employee wanted to ask, "Thank me? For what?" but Guo DaLu was already down the stairs. Confused, he knocked on his own head with his fist and sighed, "It seems that these people are not only idiot squanderers, they are also a bunch of lunatics."

A wise person once had a very wise saying: "To be regarded as an idiot squander and lunatic can be a very remarkable thing. Indeed, it is even more remarkable than being regarded as a hero or a saint." That restaurant employee was not wise, and naturally had never heard this saying before. Even if he had, he would not understand its true meaning. In reality, there are very few people who would understand the truth in this saying.

There are two types of people in this world. The first type is people who abide by the rules in everything they do, and their ways are logical. Anyone would be able to understand what and why they do things.

The other type is completely differently. This sort of person deliberately enjoys doing things in mysterious ways so that, not only are others not able to figure out what he will do, sometimes he does not even know himself. Wang Dong was this sort of person. Lin TaiPing was as well.

However, there is something of this world that is even more mysterious: money. When you do not want it, for no reason at all, it will somehow find its way to you. But in the times that you really need money, more often than not, you will not even be able to catch a glimpse of any.

What is it like to kill someone? Very few people know. Maybe one out of ten thousand people has ever killed a person.

Someone once said, "Regardless of what it is like to kill someone, at the very least, it is better than being killed." Anyone who says this has never killed before.

Someone else also said, "The feeling you get when you kill a person is much more terrifying than dying itself."

"How did you kill him?" "Why did you kill him?" Lin TaiPing was waiting for them to ask these two questions. They did not ask.

Wang Dong, Yan Qi, and Guo DaLu seemed to have an agreement. They did not ask a single question. In fact, the three of them had not even opened their mouths to speak.

Xiancheng was not a long way from the mountain city, but the absence of conversation made the distance seem very far. Guo DaLu was humming a tune. The melody line had probably been passed on for several generations already, but the lyrics most certainly were composed by him. No one else would be able to create lyrics such as these:

When we came, we were so impressive
When we left, we were so trivial
When we came, we rode a carriage
When we left, we rode nothing but the wind beneath our feet
When we came, bells and gongs announced our arrival

When we left, all had become hollow and empty
When we came...

Yan Qi piped up, "What are you singing?"

Guo DaLu: "It's called 'The Come and Go Song.' Come come, go go. You come, you go. Those who go don't come; those who come don't go."

Yan Qi suddenly started singing along with his melody. "Pass it out, but it's obstructed. If it was open, you wouldn't need to pass. Pass pass, open open. Once it's open, let it pass."

Guo DaLu asked curiously: "Pass what out?"

Yan Qi: "Dog fart. The song is called, 'Passing Dog Farts.' " [* "Passing dog farts" is a phrase that means bull***t, nonsense, or rubbish]

Guo DaLu scowled and as he retorted, "You guys should not mock me. In the past, someone begged me to sing for him, and I turned him down because I wasn't in the mood."

Wang Dong nodded knowingly. "I know what type of person that was."

Yan Qi blinked innocently. "What type?"

Wang Dong: "A deaf person."

Guo DaLu wanted to scowl at them again, but even he could not contain his laughter.'

Lin TaiPing suddenly gave a cold laugh. "A deaf person is better than those who pretend to be deaf and mute."

Guo DaLu blinked back at him. "Who is pretending to be deaf and mute?"

Lin TaiPing: "You, you, and you." He jabbed his finger into each of their faces before continuing, "You obviously have questions that you want to ask. Why are you not asking them?"

Wang Dong: "It is not that we are not asking; there is no need to ask."

Lin TaiPing: "Why is there no need?"

Wang Dong: "Those types of people, you may not complain that there are too many when they are alive, but you definitely would not protest the loss when they are dead."

Guo DaLu: "Very true. If one dies, that is one less in the world. The fewer there are of that type of people, the better." He patted Lin TaiPing on the shoulder and smiled comfortingly as he said, "Since you did not wrongly kill anyone, why would I question you?"

Lin TaiPing was clenching his teeth. He suddenly asked them, "Have any of you killed someone before?"

Guo DaLu looked at Wang Dong. Wang Dong looked over at Yan Qi. Yan Qi gave a wry smile as he answered, "I have only ever been killed by someone."

Lin TaiPing suddenly leapt into the air. He brushed past them as he flew towards the side of the road. As he landed behind a tree, the echo of his sobs carried back towards them.

Yan Qi looked at Guo DaLu. Guo DaLu looked over at Wang Dong. Wang Dong said, "He had never killed anyone in the past."

Guo DaLu nodded. "This is his first time."

Yan Qi heaved a sigh. "So, it turns out that the feeling you get when you kill someone truly is much more horrible than being killed."

Wang Dong: "When NanGong Chou realized that he was being followed, he must have thought that Lin TaiPing had discovered his secret and therefore, attacked him first to permanently shut him up.

Guo DaLu: "But instead, the one with the intention to kill ended up being killed."

Yan Qi: "Lin TaiPing's martial arts seems to be much stronger than ours and also much stronger than NanGong Chou."

Guo DaLu sighed. "This is an example where 'a person cannot be judged by his appearance, the ocean's water cannot be measured in a dou⁶.' When I first laid eyes upon him, I thought he didn't even have the strength to catch a chicken."

The sounds of sobbing had not yet ceased.

Yan Qi: "One with intentions to kill may not be have the ability to kill. And yet, even though Lin TaiPing may have killed someone, he never wanted to kill."

Guo DaLu: "Let's go over and console him."

Wang Dong: "No."

Guo Dalu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Even though crying is not as good as laughing, it is not a bad thing for a person to occasionally have a good cry."

Sighing again, Guo DaLu said, “I, personally, still prefer laughing. At least, when you are laughing, you do not need to hide behind a tree to do it.”

Yan Qi also gave a sigh. “And, no matter how hard you laugh, you need not worry that other people will come watch the scene you are making.”

The more concerned you are about people staring at you, the more people will come to stare. The sky was not yet dark. There were still lots of people on the road, and many of them had stopped, stretching their necks and peering curiously at Guo DaLu and the others. Some of the passersby had even walked over towards where they were standing.

Guo DaLu wiped the sweat on his brow nervously. Forcing an uneasy smile, he whispered, “I only hope people will not suspect that he is crying because we were bullying him.”

Nobody “suspected.” Everyone was practically certain this was the case.

Seeing the accusing expression in their eyes, Yan Qi could not help wiping at the sweat on his forehead as well. “Can you just hurry up and think of a way to convince these people to leave?”

Guo DaLu smiled wryly and answered, “I don’t have such a talent. The best I can do is dig a hole.”

Yan Qi: “What would you dig a hole for?”

Guo DaLu: “So that I can crawl in there and avoid getting stared to death by these people.”

Yan Qi let out another sigh. “Then, it would be great if you dug a bigger hole.”

Guo DaLu accused bitterly, "If you guys had not lost all that money, or at the very least, not lost all of it, we could have at least rented a carriage so that he could sit in it and cry to his heart's content." He had just finished his sentence when an elegant horse drawn carriage actually appeared, driving towards them. It stopped in front of them.

Yan Qi cast a sidelong glance over at Wang Dong and murmured to him, "We actually should not have gambled in that last round. It was nearly certain we were going to lose. We shouldn't have tried to recoup our losses."

Wang Dong: "If gamblers didn't want to recoup their losses, then those who relied on gambling to put food on their table would starve to death. And you wouldn't want to see people starving to death, would you?"

The driver of the carriage had suddenly jumped down and walked over to them. He had a cordial smile on his face as he asked, "Which one of you is Guo Daye?" [*daye is respectful form of 'mister' or 'sir;' often used in addressing a patron]

Guo DaLu: "Who is looking for me? And for what reason?"

The driver bowed respectfully and replied, "Guo Daye, please step into the carriage."

The driver bowed respectfully and replied, "Guo Daye, please step into the carriage."

Guo DaLu: "I don't like riding in a carriage. I prefer walking."

The driver smiled again. "This carriage was hired by a friend of Guo Daye. The hiring cost has already been paid."

Guo DaLu gave a start of surprise. "Who hired it?"

The driver laughed as he said, "He is Guo Daye's friend. If Guo Daye you do not know, how would I know?"

Guo DaLu thought for a moment, then all of a sudden nodded his head. "I know who it is. He is my godson."

Once they had sat down in the carriage, Lin TaiPing stopped crying. He merely sat staring forward with a blank expression on his face.

Guo DaLu was also silent. Yan Qi could not contain his curiosity and asked him, "Do you really have a godson?"

Guo DaLu smiled sarcastically. "Sure, I have a ghost as a godson. Even if I asked to be someone's godson, no one would have me because I'm so dirty. Who would ever want to be my godson?"

Yan Qi's brow furrowed. "Then who hired the coach?"

Guo DaLu: "I am eighty percent certain that it is the person who paid our tab in Kui Yuan Guan."

Yan Qi: "Did you see who that person was?"

Guo DaLu: "At that moment, I was already thanking the heavens if no one was looking at me. Do you think I would have been looking around?" That was true. A person does not dare hold up his head if it comes time to settle the tab and his wallet is empty.

Yan Qi: "What about you?" He was not addressing Lin TaiPing. Of course, Lin TaiPing had not been in the mood to notice other people around him.

Wang Dong chuckled. "The only thing I was bothering to concern myself with at that instant was the expression on

Guo Dashao's face. I had never before seen him look so adorable."

Guo DaLu glared back at him. "My only regret is that I could not be there to see the expression on your face when you lost all the money. I'm certain it would have been very adorable as well."

And so, Yan Qi fell into silence also. He, too, had not noticed the person who had paid the bill for them.

Wang Dong: "The driver was looking for Guo Dashao, so this person must be Guo Dashao's friend."

Guo DaLu let out a long sigh. "I do not have any friends that are so wealthy. Out of all my friends, the richest one is you."

Wang Dong: "I'm rich?"

Guo DaLu: "At least you have a house. Even though it is a house that people loathe and ghosts despise, a house is still a house."

Wang Dong replied lightly, "If you like it, I will give it to you."

Guo DaLu: "I don't want it."

Wang Dong: "Why not?"

Guo DaLu: "Presently, I have no possessions and my wallet is empty. I am content because there is nothing tying me down, unlike all of you who need to worry about other things."

Yan Qi: "Wang Laoda has a house to worry about, but what about me?"

Guo DaLu eyed him up and down before he grinned and replied, "You still have a brand new set of clothes. Before you do anything, you cannot help wondering whether it will dirty your outfit. When you sit, you will have to first check whether there is any mud on the ground. How can you compare to me? I am completely carefree."

Yan Qi looked steadily at him and asked, "Is there truly no person in this world that you care about? Nothing that you are concerned about?"

Guo DaLu all of a sudden grew silent. There seemed to be a trace of sorrow hidden behind his eyes. In that moment, Yan Qi realized that perhaps this person was not as happy as he portrayed himself on the outside to be, that perhaps he, too, had some painful experiences in his past. He merely was very adept at concealing these and would never reveal them to people. He would only let people know and share in his joy. He did not want people to share in the burden of his pains and sorrows.

As Yan Qi gazed at Guo DaLu, his eyes became radiant. The longer he spent with him, the more he realized that Guo DaLu was indeed quite adorable.

It was uncertain how much time had passed before Wang Dong suddenly let out a long sigh and cried, "Almost there. We're almost home." The sound of his sigh was filled with joy and contentment.

The little mountain slope could be seen through the window.

Guo DaLu could not help heaving a lengthy sigh as well. "It seems that neither dens of gold nor dens of silver can compare to your dog den." [*dog den is a slang term for home]

Wang Dong: "My dog den?"

Guo DaLu laughed. "Our dog den."

Dusk. The rays of the setting sun filled the mountainside. In this light, the half-withered autumn grass appeared to be like blades of gold, gold as far as the eye could see. The little flagstone pathway that stretched forward as it slanted down the slope was like a string of white jade amidst the mountain of gold.

A breeze was sighing. Birds were singing. The insects of autumn were murmuring in low tones. All these intermingled to form a sound that was even sweeter than music, like soft whispers in the ear of a lover.

The air was filled with the fragrance of flowers, the smell of grass, and the scent of the wind. Even the sunset seemed to have absorbed the pleasant smells of its surroundings, gentle like wisps of hair on your lover's temple.

Life could actually be so deliciously fragrant, so lovely.

Guo DaLu let out a long sigh of contentment. He laughed loudly and said, "Only now do I realize that being poor can, in fact, be a happy thing."

Yan Qi: "Happy?"

Guo DaLu: "How many rich people can actually relish in such beautiful surroundings? Or breathe in such lovely smells? The only thing they are able to smell is the stink of copper. [*the stink of money]"

Yan Qi had to laugh as well. In that instant, Guo DaLu suddenly noticed that when he smiled, his face was as

radiant as the setting sun. “I have only just now discovered that you are actually not the least bit ugly. But you are a little too dirty most of the time.”

Surprisingly, this time Yan Qi did not send a cutting retort back at him, and on the contrary, lowered his head slowly. He was normally not one who allowed himself to be teased without responding. What could have caused this change? Was it the sunset? The quiet breeze? Or perhaps it was the cheerful smile on Guo DaLu’s face?

Wang Dong suddenly interrupted, “Having money is not necessarily a bad thing.”

Guo DaLu: “What about being poor?”

Wang Dong: “Neither is being poor.”

Guo DaLu: “Than what would be bad?”

Wang Dong: “Nothing is truly bad. Whether something is good or bad is a function of whether you know how to truly live and enjoy life.”

Guo DaLu mulled over these words carefully. His heart all of a sudden was flooded with warmth, joy, and contentment. He was content for the mere fact that he was alive. And because he was alive, he could enjoy the life he lived – this life that was filled with such beauty.

That is why, my friends, you should not worry when you do have money, and even more importantly, not be anxious when you are poor. If you learn how to take pleasure in life itself, then your existence will not be pointless. Even when, one day, you depart from this world, you will die happy because you will know that your life had been fuller and happier than others.

The carriage could not drive up the mountain, so they got off and travelled the remainder of the way on foot. They took their time, strolling at a leisurely pace, because they understood that no matter how slow they walked, they would still eventually arrive at their destination.

Night gradually fell, but they did not grow concerned. They knew that it would not be long before the sky was bright again.

And so, their hearts were flooded with pleasure. Even Lin TaiPing's eyes sparkled once again.

Finally, Wang Dong's house came into sight. Though the house was old and worn, under the hazy light of the dusk sky, it appeared to be as beautiful as a palace.

Each person has a palace of their own; that palace exists within the heart. Strangely, though, some people may never find their palace.

The sharp, angular features of Wang Dong's face appeared to have grown softer as well. He suddenly gave a wide grin and asked, "Can you guess what will be the first thing I do when I get home?"

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi scrambled to give the answer first as they cried simultaneously, "Get on your bed and sleep."

Wang Dong: "Correct answer."

But life is always filled with unforeseen circumstances.

They had not yet arrived at the manor when they suddenly saw a window become illuminated from the light of a lamp. At first, it was just the one window facing the doorway. Then, they watched as, one by one, every window was lit up with

lamplight from inside the house and glowed brightly in the night.

They stopped in astonishment.

Yan Qi: "There is someone in the house."

Guo DaLu: "Do you have friends that would come for a visit?"

Wang Dong: "I used to, but ever since I sold my last chair, all my friends suddenly disappeared." He gave a nonchalant smile before resuming, "Perhaps they are all as lazy as I am and afraid they won't have anything to sit on when they come."

That one nonchalant smile showed how deep an understanding he had on life. Hence, he never placed too high an expectation on anyone. When he gave, he never expected to receive anything in return – perhaps this was one of the reasons why his life was so much happier than most people.

Yan Qi frowned. "Then, who could have lit the lamps?"

Guo DaLu's lips formed a little smile. "Why should we stand here and guess? Once we go in, won't we know the answer?"

Normally, this would be a correct approach. This time, though, he was wrong.

End of Chapter 9

Chapter 10 - The Scholar of Unknown Origin

There was nobody inside the house. It was as if the lamps had lit themselves.

Brand new lamps burned brilliantly, glimmering like gold, on a brand-new table made of wood from a pear tree. And this new table stood on top of a new Persian rug. Freshly picked flowers had been placed next to the lamps – everything you could possibly need was there. So long as it was something that you would see in a house, this manor had it. It was like a miracle had happened there.

The lone thing that had been left in its original position was Wang Dong's large bed. But new sheets had been arranged neatly on it, and someone had even laid a flower blossom on the blankets.

Guo DaLu's eyes were ready to fall from his head as he stared in awe from the doorway. He muttered, "Have we gone to the wrong place?"

Yan Qi smiled dryly. "Not possible. No other place would have such a large bed."

Guo DaLu: "It appears that a supernatural deity has taken care of this place for us. I wonder if it was a female fairy?"

Yan Qi: "I would guess that it is because Wang Laoda, like Dong Yong⁷, is a filial son and a fairy in heaven has been moved by his actions."

Guo DaLu: "Perhaps the fairy came to find me. I am a filial person also."

Yan Qi: "You're a foolish person."

Though they were saying this with their lips, in their hearts, they understood that a person had to have brought all these items there. This person could very likely have been the one who paid for their meal at Kui Yuan Guan. Their jesting was merely a way to conceal their surprise and apprehension because they could not deduce who this person was and, furthermore, why he would do all this for them.

Wang Dong slowly strolled over to his bed, lazily removed the shoes on his feet, then speedily plopped himself onto the bed. Everything he did was always nice and leisurely, never one bit hurried. But when it came to lying down in bed, he was extremely quick about it, as if his life depended on it.

Guo DaLu frowned at him. "You are going to sleep, just like that?"

Wang Dong gave a loud yawn. That was his answer.

Guo DaLu: "Do you know who brought all these things?"

Wang Dong: "No. All I know is that when I am tired, I should sleep." Whether these items were brought by a fairy or left by an angry ghost, he did not care one bit. Even if all the fairies and angry ghosts of the world were to arrive at the moment, he still would not let it disturb his slumber. All he needed to do was to close his eyes, and he would be able to fall asleep.

Guo DaLu sighed, "I do admire this ability of his."

Yan Qi bit his lip as he said, "I am going to the courtyard in the back to have a look. Maybe the person is there."

There was a row of dwellings along the rear courtyard. These were where Sour Plum Soup and the others had stayed.

In the front of the manor, in addition to the main hall and the flower hall, there were seven or eight rooms. Besides the one that Wang Dong slept in, comfortable-looking beds had been set-up in three other rooms. Guo DaLu mumbled to himself, "He actually knew that there are four of us living here. How considerate."

Yan Qi's voice was suddenly heard yelling loudly from the rear of the house, "Hurry and come look! There is a... a ..."
Whatever there was, he could not seem to say it.

Guo DaLu was the first to dash out to the back. Lin TaiPing followed closely behind him.

The courtyard had been swept clean. Even more surprising, from some unknown place, tall bamboos had been moved and placed there in neat rows. There were also clusters of chrysanthemum flowers.

Yan Qi was standing among the chrysanthemums, staring dumbstruck at an object.

He was looking at a coffin – a brand new coffin.

There appeared to be a row of words engraved onto the lid. As they looked closely, they saw that it read, "the coffin of NanGong Chou."

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Lin TaiPing's body grew icy cold, and the color in his lips disappeared.

Even Guo DaLu felt his heart seize slightly when he saw the writing. Addressing Lin TaiPing, he asked, "Where did you kill him?"

Lin TaiPing: "Just... just outside."

Guo DaLu: "Outside of where?"

Lin TaiPing: "Outside of the place he was staying at."

Guo DaLu: "After you killed him, did you bury the corpse?"

Lin TaiPing gnawed on his lower lip nervously. He shook his head.

Guo DaLu sighed. "You cared only about killing and not about burying."

Lin TaiPing looked as if he was about to break down into tears.

Yan Qi spoke up in his defense. "Anyone who kills for the first time would feel frazzled and nervous at that moment. And after he has done the deed, he does not even dare cast another glance. He would not be in any mood to care about other little details."

Guo DaLu: "You seem to be speaking from experience."

Yan Qi: "Don't forget, I may never have killed anyone, but I have been killed by people before."

Guo DaLu turned back to Lin TaiPing. Exhaling another sigh, he asked, "At the time it happened, was there anyone present who could have seen you?"

Lin TaiPing shook his head again.

Guo DaLu: "If there had been no one there, who could have put the body into the coffin? And who could have brought the coffin here?" A giggle suddenly escaped from him. "The dead man could not have jumped in himself, then sent the coffin here, could he?"

Guo DaLu had a bad habit: no matter what the situation, he could not help cracking jokes. He knew, himself, that this last joke was not very funny at all.

The expression on Lin TaiPing's face grew even more miserable. Clenching his teeth even harder on his lip, he stammered, "I... I hadn't intended..."

But he had not finished his sentence when a "dong" sound was heard echoing from within the casket, then another "dong."

Even Yan Qi and Guo DaLu's faces paled slightly.

"Is it possible the dead man in the coffin has returned from the grave?"

Guo DaLu gave a comforting pat on Lin TaiPing's shoulder. Putting on a forced smile, he reassured, "There's no need to be frightened. We were not scared of him when he was alive. What is there to fear now that he's dead?"

Yan Qi: "Since we're not afraid, let's just open the casket and let him out." He stepped forward, as if he really intended on opening the lid.

"Wait!" The word slipped out of Guo DaLu's mouth.

Yan Qi: "Didn't you say you were not afraid?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course I'm not. It's just that... it's just that..."

“Dong, dong dong!” This time, several successive bangs rang out, louder and more persistent than before, as if the corpse inside was desperate to escape. A fainthearted person would have fled the scene long ago.

Lin TaiPing suddenly spoke up. “Let me open it. He came to find me.”

Guo DaLu: “You cannot go over there. Let me do it.” While he was speaking, he had already leapt towards the casket.

In reality, his heart was also trembling with fear, perhaps even more so than anyone else there. If he had been in Lin TaiPing’s place, there was a chance he would have run away already. But Lin TaiPing was his friend, and so long as it involved his friend, even if he was terrified, he would still force himself to persist with the task.

Yan Qi’s eyes had a tender expression in them as he gazed intently at Guo DaLu. “You are not scared you’re going to be snatched away by a ghost?”

Guo DaLu: “Who said I’m not scared?” As the word “scared” left his lips, his hand had already reached forward. He raised the coffin lid.

He raised the coffin lid.

In a flash, something alive and moving jumped out of the casket, making loud cries at them.

It cried, “Woof woof woof!” It was a dog. A black dog. A live and moving black dog.

Guo DaLu stood frozen in shock for an instant, then wiped away at the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead. He wanted to laugh but somehow could not force anything out. A long time passed before he finally let out a long

breath and said with a dry smile, "That was not a very clever practical joke. Only an idiot would play a prank like that."

Yan Qi: "He definitely is not an idiot, and that most certainly was not a prank."

Guo DaLu: "If it wasn't a prank, then what was it?"

Yan Qi: "Not only does this person know that Lin TaiPing killed NanGong Chou, he also knows where Lin TaiPing lives."

Guo DaLu heaved a sigh. "Yes, he does seem to know a great deal of information. But, why would he do this?"

Yan Qi answered with a sigh of his own. "Maybe he has some sort of ulterior motive, or maybe it is simply because he is bored and has nothing better to do with his time. Regardless of the reason, one thing is certain: now that he has started, he will not stop."

Guo DaLu: "Do you believe he is going to cause more trouble?"

Yan Qi nodded. "That is why, as long as we are patient and wait, we are certain to find out who he is eventually." Patting Lin TaiPing on the shoulder, he smiled and said, "Therefore, we should all just go get some rest now. There are some comfortable beds waiting for us, and the individual who chooses not to sleep is the true idiot."

Wang Dong's voice could be heard echoing from far away within the house. "Correct answer."

The next day, Guo DaLu was roused from his sleep by the jingling of a bell. By the time he was fully awake, the sounds

of “ding ding dong dong” could still be heard. They seemed to be coming from the flower hall.

In general, a person is usually more ill-tempered when he has just woken up, particularly if he was aroused from his sleep against his will. This is called “out-of-bed temper.”

Guo DaLu could not contain his temper as he bellowed from his bed, “Who’s the one shaking that blasted bell non-stop? Does your hand have an itch?” He seemed to faintly hear Wang Dong yelling at the same time.

The bell’s tinkling sound continued.

Throwing himself out of bed, he tore barefoot out of his room, all the while grumbling under his breath, “It must be the brat, Yan Qi. His hands always seem to have a tendency to itch.”

A laugh was heard as someone replied, “My hands only like beating people up when they get itchy. They do not shake bells.”

Yan Qi had come out of his room also. He was dressed already, his clothes neat and orderly. It was as if he never took off his clothes to sleep.

Guo DaLu rubbed his eyes sleepily, gave a wry little smile, then frowned as he said, “It cannot be Lin TaiPing, though, unless he really has been hypnotized by a ghost.”

The bell jingled again.

This time they heard it very clearly. It had definitely come from the flower hall. The two of them exchanged a glance, then at the same time, dashed towards that room.

Lin TaiPing was in the flower hall, but he was not the one shaking the bell. He only stood there, staring in surprise. The one doing the ringing was a cat – a black cat.

A bell hung by a string from a planter while the other end of the string had been tied to one of the legs of the cat. The cat was jumping unceasingly, and so the bell continued its non-stop ringing.

The table in the center of the flower hall had been laden with several different items, and each one of them was edible. There was chicken, duck, baozi, mantou [*a steamed bun, usually with no filling], and even a large jug of wine.

The black cat was jingling the bell to call them over to eat breakfast.

Guo DaLu rubbed his eyes again, this time in disbelief. “Is there a problem with my eyesight?”

Yan Qi: “The only time your eyes have a problem is when you are staring at women.”

Guo DaLu smiled sarcastically back at him. “Maybe this is a female black cat.”

Yan Qi: “It’s a male.”

Guo DaLu: “How do you know?”

Yan Qi: “Because it seems like he has not taken a fancy to you yet.”

Guo DaLu blinked. “Even if it is a lady cat, she wouldn’t be interested in me. She would definitely fall for Wang Laoda.”

It was Yan Qi’s turn to be perplexed. He could not contain his curiosity as he asked, “Why?”

Guo DaLu: "Because lady cats are attracted to lazy cats."

Wang Dong's voice suddenly rang out from the back of the manor, "In my opinion, this one is a female."

This time, both Yan Qi and Guo DaLu did not understand and they yelled, nearly in perfect harmony, "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because she knows how to cook." A cat, naturally, cannot cook.

Guo DaLu tore off a drumstick from the chicken. He shoved it into his mouth, before pulling it back out again. "The chicken is still warm."

Yan Qi: "The baozi are still piping hot as well."

Guo DaLu: "It looks as if the food was brought here not long ago."

Yan Qi: "Correct answer."

Guo DaLu: "Who could have brought it? Could it really be the person who paid for us in Kui Yuan Guan?"

Yan Qi: "Another correct answer."

Guo DaLu: "But why would he try to suck up to us? He wouldn't really want to be a godson of mine, would he?"

Yan Qi: "Mew mew... mew mew..."

Guo DaLu: "You're going to turn into a cat. I don't understand cat language."

A "pffft" was heard as a laugh escaped from Yan Qi. "I was talking to your godson." He ripped off a little bit from every item on the table and placed them in a dish. The cat bounded over to them. Stroking the fur on its neck gently,

he cooed, “You were the one who brought all this good stuff. You should get the first taste.”

Guo DaLu laughed. “What a filial person he is! It almost seems like he is the cat’s godson.” In actual fact, he knew, of course, that Yan Qi was doing it to test if the food had been poisoned.

Yan Qi was attentive to every detail in everything he did, but yet judging from his appearance, he did not seem to be a person with this type of characteristic. Attentive people should not be so filthy; he looked as if he had never bathed before.

There was no poison in the food. Guo DaLu’s drumstick had already disappeared into his belly.

Yan Qi: “Well, it looks as if this person, whoever he may be, does not want to harm us. But he does act like he has some psychological issues.”

Guo DaLu: “Not just some psychological issues, a lot of issues. Do you think he would have done this if he just had a few issues?” He swallowed another baozi. Then, unexpectedly, he said, “This person has to be a woman.”

Yan Qi: “How do you know?”

Guo DaLu: “Because only a woman would do something insane like that.”

Yan Qi bit his lip and actually nodded his head in agreement before he replied, “And the reason why she did it could be because she fancies you. She wants to butter you up because...”

Guo DaLu gave a nonchalant laugh, but he could not stop himself from asking, “Because what? Because I have a

manly air? Because I'm handsome?"

Yan Qi: "None of those."

Guo DaLu: "Then what is it?"

Yan Qi answered offhandedly, "Because she is an insane woman, and only an insane woman would ever fall in love with you."

Guo DaLu tried to pull his face into a scowl, but laughter still escaped from his lips as he countered, "An insane woman is better than having no women."

Outside, the sun drenched the earth in its brilliance. On such a beautiful day, in such lovely weather, no matter what anyone said to him, he would not be offended. He especially would not get angry at Yan Qi.

He liked Yan Qi. He was slowly realizing that, amongst his little group of friends, he was fondest of Yan Qi. What was bizarre, though, was that it seemed as if Yan Qi made a deliberate effort to disagree with him in everything. It almost appeared as if he was looking for opportunities to squabble with him.

However, even more strange was, the more Yan Qi squabbled with him, the more he liked Yan Qi.

Wang Dong would observe from the sidelines as the two of them bickered back and forth. And as he watched them, his eyes would be filled with a peculiar sort of laughter.

Guo DaLu's hand had just finished stuffing another baozi into his mouth before he started reaching for the jug of wine. Yan Qi glared at him and snapped, "Drunkard! Can you not just wait until the sun has set before you drink your alcohol?"

Guo DaLu smiled, and he actually set his wine cup down. He grumbled, “Who said I was going to drink? I was just going to use the wine to wet my throat a bit.”

Right at that moment, he suddenly heard someone outside speak in slow tones, reciting poetically, “Travelling far up Hanshan [* Han mountain], the rocky pathway is steep. In the depths of the white clouds there is a dwelling. Halting the cart to sit gazing lovingly upon the maple grove. Frosted leaves grow red amongst flowers of the second month. Aaah... So lovely is this scenery. So lovely is this dwelling.”

Guo DaLu sniggered. “A suanding [*slang; word used to describe scholars and mock them for being poor] has arrived.”

Wang Dong: “Not one. Three.”

Wang Dong: “Not one. Three.”

Guo DaLu: “Why are you so certain?”

Before Wang Dong could respond, another voice was heard floating in from outside, “Since gongzi [*an honorific used to address a young man from a wealthy or honourable family] you like this place, why don’t we rest here for a while? My legs are sore from walking.”

A third voice chimed in, “I wonder who the master of this dwelling is. Do you think he will let us go in to sit and rest?”

Judging from the two new voices, the speakers were not past their adolescence. But, a youth is still a person. As Wang Dong predicted, three people really had arrived at the manor.

Guo DaLu let out a sigh of admiration. "Such an acute pair of ears. Even though he is just a lazy cat, his hearing is still sharper than a normal person."

With a "mew," the black cat scurried outside. A cat's sense of hearing truly is very sensitive. Even Wang Dong had to laugh.

They heard the gongzi speak again [Note: - Anytime this gongzi speaks, the style is very flowery and poetic in the original Chinese, stereotypical of how a scholar would speak]. "The tall doors may be closed, but they are not unwelcoming. This intelligent servant [referring to the cat] has already come to receive the guests. It would appear that not only is the master of this dwelling a hospitable person, he is also refined."

Guo DaLu could not help laughing in amusement. "Perhaps not exactly refined but definitely hospitable." He was the first to step outside in greeting.

The light of the rising sun was brilliant, fresh like a mantou just off the stove. Gazing upon it, one could not help but feel a warmth rise from the depths of the heart. On such a lovely day, everyone would feel especially friendly.

A cordial smile filled Guo DaLu's face as he looked at the three strangers outside the door. Two children with bangs covering their foreheads, one with a book chest on his back, the other with a carrying pole on his shoulder and loads hanging from the ends of the pole, stood behind their master. The sun had turned their two little faces into overripe apples.

Their master was a suave and cultured scholar. He was quite young, very handsome and elegant-looking, and carried himself with a gentle and gracious manner.

Nobody could possibly take a disliking to this threesome.

Guo DaLu flashed a grin at them. "Did you come here to look at scenery? You've chosen a great day and great weather."

The scholar bowed deeply, his hands clasped in front of his breast and replied humbly, "Xiao ke [*a very humble way of saying 'I' or 'me'] has gratuitously intruded and has disturbed your mood, master of this dwelling. Please pardon my offense."

Guo DaLu: "I'm not the master, either, just a guest. That's how I know that the master of this place is hospitable."

The scholar smiled. "Wherein does the master reside? Would xiao ke perchance be granted the privilege of meeting him?"

Guo DaLu: "The master here may be hospitable, but he has a bit of a sickness."

Scholar: "May I enquire what this sickness may be? Xiao ke has a modest knowledge in regards to the art of medicinal practice."

Guo DaLu laughed. "This sickness of his cannot be healed. He has developed the disease of laziness. If you would like to see him, you will have to go inside yourself."

The scholar smiled and answered, "Should that be the case, then 'obedience is better than politeness.' " Even the manner in which he walked was very cultured, to the point that he looked so delicate he would not be able to stand a gust of wind. However, the book chest and carrying loads that the two boys were bearing appeared to be quite heavy.

The child with the long pole was at the back, carrying the burden easily on his shoulder. As he walked along,

something within the load rang “dong dong” with him.

Guo DaLu rubbed the child’s head gently. “What is inside this load you are carrying? Is it heavy?”

The child’s large eyes blinked back at him. “Not very heavy. Only a few bottles of wine. Maotai [*a type of wine] should be kept in bottles. Our gongzi loves drinking wine the most. He also enjoys composing poetry. I don’t know how to write poems. I only know how to drink wine.”

Guo DaLu laughed in delight and asked, “You know how to drink too? How old are you?”

The child answered, “Fourteen. Tomorrow I’ll be fifteen. My name is DiaoShi [*diao = to fish or the act of fishing; shi = poem or poetry]. He is SaoSu [*sao = to sweep or clean; su = secular, of this world, coarse, unrefined]. Our household’s gongzi is surnamed He. We come from Damingfu. Because our master enjoys travelling around to view the sceneries of mountains and rivers, in one year, there is seldom a day that we are at home.”

For every question that Guo DaLu asked, this child would respond with at least seven or eight sentences.

The more Guo DaLu watched him, the more he found the boy extremely entertaining. Deliberately teasing him, he asked, “Why are you called DiaoShi? Poems are not fish. How can you fish them up?”

DiaoShi’s mouth twitched slightly, as if he looked down on Guo DaLu. “You haven’t even heard of this allusion before? Wine has another name. It is sometimes called diaoshigou. [*diao = to fish, shi = poems or poetry, gou = hook; combined, it can be translated as, “the hook that fishes

poetry” because drinking wine can bring the inspiration required to compose poetry]

Because I always carry gongzi’s wine for him, I am called DiaoShi. And because reading can cleanse your mind of things that are worldly and coarse, he is called SaoSu.” He eyed Guo DaLu up and down a few times. “You probably haven’t had all that much education?”

Guo DaLu threw his head back and laughed approvingly. “Good child! It is true that under a strong general, there are no weak soldiers. Not only does the boy appreciate wine, he is learned too.” He let out another guffaw. “I may not have read all that many books, but the quantity of wine I have consumed is not small either. Would you like to drink a few glasses with me?”

DiaoShi: “If your drinking ability really is that good, why won’t you drink with our gongzi?”

It was only then that Guo DaLu noticed that, by now, He Gongzi had entered the flower hall for quite awhile and was starting to make small talk with Wang Dong and the others. Observing them through the window, he could tell that Wang Dong and Lin TaiPing had already developed a good impression of the stranger.

Yan Qi, though, appeared to be preoccupied with something and was constantly twisting his head around to look outside. The instant he saw Guo DaLu looking at him, he stood up and, with his back to everyone else, made a furtive hand signal in Guo DaLu’s direction as he walked outside.

When he walked out the flower hall, Guo DaLu greeted him and asked, “Were you looking for me for a reason?”

Yan Qi glared at him. "Why is it that you never seem to grow up? You show more enthusiasm conversing with a child."

Guo DaLu chortled, "That boy's ability to speak is stronger than a lot of adults. Sometimes, as you are chatting with a child, you will discover that you suddenly feel a lot younger also."

Yan Qi did not reply. Instead, he walked slowly along the long hallway, in the direction of the rear courtyard. Guo DaLu had no choice but to follow him but could not help asking again, "Do you have something you want to tell me?"

Yan Qi walked another distance before he suddenly turned around. "What do you think of this He Gongzi?"

Guo DaLu: "He appears to be a very cultured and refined person. And I've heard rumours that he can drink."

Yan Qi: "Do you think he might be that..."

Understanding flashed across Guo DaLu's eyes as he interjected, "That person who paid for our meal in Kui Yuan Guan?"

Yan Qi nodded. "Do you think it's possible?"

Guo DaLu: "Mm. I hadn't thought of this point at first, but the more I think about it, the more I think it's possible."

Yan Qi: "This place here does not have any known sights or scenery. Why would a traveller somehow roam all the way over here? Plus, he decides to arrive, not a little earlier, not a little later but, coincidentally, on this particular morning."

Guo DaLu: "Life has many coincidences, but this case does seem a little too coincidental."

Yan Qi: "Have you ever seen him before?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Yan Qi: "Think a little harder."

Guo DaLu: "No need to think. I would never forget it if I saw someone like him."

Yan Qi nibbled on his lip. "And judging from Wang Laoda and Lin TaiPing's expressions, they don't seem to know him either."

Guo DaLu: "What is his name?"

Yan Qi: "He says that he is called He YaFeng, but that could be an alias."

Guo DaLu: "Why would he use an alias? Do you think he intends to do us harm?"

Yan Qi: "Up to this point, I have not perceived any bad intentions from him."

Guo DaLu: "Not only are there no bad intentions, you could practically say he is treating us much too nicely, to the point that it is unreasonable."

Yan Qi: "It is because he is being so nice to us that my suspicions were raised – when a person acts overly kind to others, he more or less has some sort of hidden motive."

Guo DaLu gave an unexpected laugh.

Yan Qi: "What are you laughing about?"

Guo DaLu: "It just occurred to me, it is really difficult to know how to conduct yourself in this world. If you treat others too

nicely, they will think you have a hidden motive. But, yet, if you treat them badly, they will call you a b*stard."

Yan Qi glowered at him. "I knew you would defend him."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because he can drink. Drunkards always think that as long as someone enjoys drinking, he cannot be a bad person."

Guo DaLu smiled in reply. "That is a true statement. Those who drink without restraint are usually forthright people. You would never see a person who is intoxicated still thinking up schemes to hurt others."

Yan Qi: "You are not drunk yet."

Guo DaLu: "Soon. I'm planning on going inside right now and getting him drunk." He laughed before continuing, "Once he's drunk, we won't have to worry about whether he's telling the truth or not."

Yan Qi suddenly laughed also.

Guo DaLu asked curiously, "Why are you laughing?"

Yan Qi: "I was just thinking, at the very least, you have one good thing about you that you do better than others."

Guo DaLu: "I have several good points; at least 300 or more of them. Which one are you talking about?"

Yan Qi: "You know how to exploit those opportunities."

Guo DaLu: "What opportunities?"

Yan Qi: "Opportunities to drink! "

Guo DaLu was mistaken about one thing: people do not all behave the same when they are sober, so neither do they all react in the same way to being intoxicated. Not everyone was like him who, once he was drunk, would disclose anything that he had in his heart.

After drinking, some individuals will boast and exaggerate, saying a bunch of nonsense so that even they themselves do not know what they are talking about. But when their head clears, they have completely forgotten what they had said.

There are others who do not say anything after they have had much to drink. This type of person may weep his heart out, or collapse into a fit of laughter, or perhaps just put his head down and fall into a deep slumber, but for certain he will not utter a single word.

Should he cry, it will be like a son grieving the death of his mother. Furthermore, each sob will be more heart wrenching than the previous one, as if he is the only miserable person remaining in the world. Even if you kneel down and plead to him and give him two hundred liang of silver, he will only be more inconsolable. But when he awakens and you ask him why he was crying, he himself will be completely baffled.

If he laughs, it will be as if the sky has suddenly opened up and littered the ground with ingots of gold, and he is the only one who can pick them up. Even if his home has been burned to the ground, he will still continue to laugh. Should you go and “smack smack smack,” slap him over a dozen times across the face, he may howl even harder.

Now, when this type of person falls into a drunken sleep, it is even harder to handle. All the people in the world could come and give him a kick, and he still would not awaken. Even tossing him into the river will not rouse him from his

slumber. As chance would have it, He FengYa was this type of person.

In the beginning, he appeared to be a skilled drinker and actually drank rather quickly as, cup after cup, he poured the wine into his throat. But then, in the blink of an eye, he was sound asleep.

Once he was sleeping, Guo DaLu started to laugh. Yan Qi snapped angrily, "Are you drunk too?"

Guo DaLu: "Me drunk? Do you see one thing that suggests I am drunk?"

Yan Qi: "Not one thing, eight or nine things."

Guo DaLu: "You're mistaken. Right now I am as alert as Confucius."

Yan Qi: "But you laugh like a mutt."

Guo DaLu: "I'm laughing at him because we haven't even started and he has already let me get him drunk."

Yan Qi: "Do you still remember why you wanted him drunk in the first place?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course I do. I had wanted to get him to speak the truth."

Yan Qi: "And has he said it?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Yan Qi: "He said it? What did he say?"

Guo DaLu: "He said, if he really had malicious intentions, he would not let himself get drunk and moreover, not drunk to the point that he looks like a dead pig."

Yan Qi looked him up and down, then shook his head as he said, "Sometimes I really cannot see through you. Are you drunk? Or are you actually clear-headed?"

Guo DaLu giggled and looked over at Wang Dong.

Wang Dong: "What are you looking at me for?"

Guo DaLu: "For you to say, when I seem clear-headed, I am actually drunk, but the times when I am drunk, I am in fact clear-headed."

Wang Dong had to laugh. That was something that he would say.

Guo DaLu: "Is that a correct answer?"

Wang Dong laughed. "Correct answer."

Two beds had also been set-up in the row of dwellings at the rear courtyard. It almost seemed as if these beds were placed there in anticipation of drunken guests. He FengYa was carried in, like a dead body, and laid onto one of the beds.

Guo DaLu chortled, "He chose a good day to come. If he came a couple days earlier, he would have had to sleep on the floorboards."

Wang Dong: "I just hope this snooze of his lasts until tomorrow morning."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "So I don't need to pawn some items."

Guo DaLu: "Why would you need to pawn anything?"

Wang Dong: "To treat the guest to dinner."

Guo DaLu: "Perhaps we won't need to pawn anything. All we need to do is wait for the cat to ring its bell."

Yan Qi: "You think dinner is going to be provided by someone?"

Guo DaLu: "Mm."

Yan Qi could not help letting out a giggle. "You are acting as if you will be eating that meal for sure."

Guo DaLu laughed hysterically. "Completely correct. I am ready to eat his food for the rest of my life and let him support me into my old age." His voice was especially loud, as if he deliberately wanted someone to hear him. Had that person been hiding the whole time, secretly spying on them? Was that person He YaFeng? Was he really intoxicated?

People who get drunk easily typically sober up quickly as well. It was not yet sundown when the two youths suddenly ran from the rear courtyard to the front of the manor. They stood respectfully in front of the foursome and presented an invitation card to them.

DiaoShi: "Our household's gongzi said that this morning he intruded upon everyone, so tonight should be his opportunity to return the hospitality. He instructed that we must successfully persuade you to accept the invitation."

Guo DaLu cast a look over at Wang Dong and winked. Wang Dong mumbled under his breath, "Looks as if we do not even need to wait for the cat to ring its bell."

DiaoShi did not hear what he had said, but even if he had heard, he would not have understood what he was saying.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, he asked, "Wang Daye, what was that you just said?"

Without waiting for Wang Dong to open his mouth to respond, Guo DaLu jumped in and said, "He said we definitely will accept"

Yan Qi let out a sigh and shook his head. "This guy's skin isn't very thin, is it?"

DiaoShi blinked his eyes as he asked Yan Qi, "This daye, what is that you said?"

Guo DaLu barged in once more and replied for him, "He said that we are leaving immediately."

End of Chapter 10

Chapter 11 - The Fist of Guo DaLu

DiaoShi beamed at them. "If that is the case, we must go back and make preparations."

Guo DaLu: "Hurry. The faster the better."

DiaoShi gave a deep respectful bow. Without warning, he squinted at SaoSu and in a low voice, hissed, "Hand it over."

SaoSu scowled back at him and huffed, "What is your rush? So this time you won."

This time, it was Guo DaLu who could not suppress his nosiness as he asked, "What did you say?"

DiaoShi interrupted, "He didn't say anything." Grabbing SaoSu, he tried to slip away.

SaoSu seemed to be more honest and upfront. He appeared to be quite agitated as he said, red-faced, "We had a bet and I lost a diao qian⁸ to him. He is in a hurry to collect from me."

Guo DaLu: "How did you lose?"

SaoSu: "I was concerned that you, sirs, would not accept the invitation. But he said..." His eyes were fixed on Guo DaLu. He shook his head unexpectedly. "I don't dare say what he said."

Guo DaLu: "You don't need to worry. Nobody is going to blame you."

Looking back at him with wide eyes, SaoSu asked, "What if someone does?"

Guo DaLu: “It still does not matter. I will protect you.”

Only after hearing this could SaoSu smile. “He said, even if the others are embarrassed to accept [the favour], daye, you would most certainly go because, among this group, daye, you’re the most thick-skinned.” He had just finished his sentence before he hastily grabbed Diaoshi and fled. The sounds of their snickers could still be heard as they retreated off to safety.

Guo DaLu was both annoyed and amused as he grumbled, “It turns out that little rascal isn’t all that honest. He certainly knows how to ridicule people in a roundabout way.”

Yan Qi could not hold in his giggles. “You cannot say that he’s ridiculing you. He is merely stating the truth.”

Wang Dong: “It is not really that he is thick-skinned; it’s because ‘a person’s poverty stifles his pride’.”

Yan Qi: “Plus, this person is the reincarnation of a starved ghost.”

Guo DaLu did not get angry. He answered lightly, “Alright. I am poor, starving, and thick-skinned. You guys are all junzi [*gentleman; possess character and integrity].” He suddenly gave a couple of sarcastic chuckles. “But if it were not for this thick-skinned person, you bunch of wei junzi [*wei means false; wei junzi means “false gentleman” or hypocrite] would be going to the pawnshop and making spectacles of yourselves.”

Yan Qi: “No matter what, they are still our guests. How could you have the audacity to eat their food?”

Guo DaLu replied coldly, “At the very least, he is a human being. Eating from him is better than eating from a cat. If a person can ecstatically consume the food that a cat brings,

what dignity can he possibly have left to put on an air of grandeur?"

Wang Dong: "Who wants to put on an air of grandeur? I just wanted him to bring the food and wine directly here, that's all."

There was not much food, but there was a lot of wine.

Though the amount was modest, the foods themselves were exquisite. They were arranged in a partitioned box, and even the colors were coordinated nicely so that anyone just looking at it would still feel happy.

He FengYa: "This fare may have been prepared last night, but xiaodi [*younger brother; can be a humble way of referring to yourself] frequently travels and is moderately versed in the skill of food preservation. I guarantee that it has not gone bad. But regrettably, offering provisions for journey to guests is rather impolite."

A chuckle escaped from Guo DaLu. "You had already prepared all this food last night? Did you predict that you would be inviting guests tonight?"

DiaoShi was pouring wine as he rushed in to answer, "Our household's gongzi enjoys company. No matter who we encounter on the road, gongzi will certainly drink a couple cups with him. That is why no matter where we go, we always have a sufficient amount of food and wine."

Guo DaLu looked at him, winked, and whispered, "If that is the case, it seems that I'm not the only one who is thick-skinned."

He FengYa: "Guo xiong, did you say something?"

Guo DaLu: "I said, he..." DiaoShi coughed loudly. Guo DaLu grinned. "...he is pouring the wine too slowly. I am too impatient to wait." He was the first to raise his wine cup. Sniffing its contents, he exclaimed, "Nice wine. I will 'present Buddha with some borrowed flowers' [*a saying meaning, to borrow something and make it a gift] and raise my glass first to the host."

He was ready to pour the contents down his throat when He FengYa placed a hand on his and smiled. "Guo xiong, wait a moment. The first drink should be in honour of you four sirs. The four of you all ..."

A black dog and a black cat suddenly scampered in together from outside and scurried onto the table, knocking the freshly poured cups of wine over.

The expression on He FengYa's face changed, and he struck out unexpectedly.

His hands were pale and delicate, as if they had never come in contact with anything filthy before, as if, even if a wine jug tipped over, he would not reach out to support it.

This particular dog and cat, however, looked as if they had just rolled around in a puddle of mud.

Yet, the instant he struck out, he had immediately seized them both by the neck, one in each hand, and raised them high up to toss them outside.

As he was about to fling the animals away, two pairs of hands reached over and lightly caught them. Guo DaLu caught the black cat; Yan Qi caught the black dog.

Stroking the cat's neck, Guo DaLu smiled and cooed, "Why are you here? Did you want to steal He Gongzi's role as the

host?”

Yan Qi patted the dog on the head as he said, “Why are you here? Could it be that you are like Mr. Guo, anxious to drink the wine?”

He FengYa’s brow creased as he forced a smile. “Such dirty creatures. Why would you still want to hold them against your body?”

Guo DaLu: “I like cats, especially cats that like to treat guests [to food and wine].”

Yan Qi: “I like mutts, especially ones that like to drink.” When the wine had spilled onto the table, the dog had stretched out his tongue to lick up the spoils.

Wang Dong all of a sudden said, “Too bad it’s not a golden Pekingese.”

Lin TaiPing picked up a piece of soy-sauce chicken with his chopsticks, then put it down again. “Too bad this isn’t a barbecue duck.”

Unperturbed, He FengYa smiled pleasantly. “Why is it xiaodi cannot understand what you four sirs are saying?”

Guo DaLu laughed. “Maybe we are all just speaking drunken words.”

Without warning, the dog in Yan Qi’s arms gave a tragic bark and jumped up from Yan Qi’s embrace. With a “thump,” it fell onto the table, as if someone had suddenly slit its throat before it even had a chance to cry out.

This jumpy and lively dog had all of a sudden become a dead dog.

Yan Qi gazed down at the dead dog, then lifted his eyes to look at Guo DaLu. "Do you see? This is an example of what happens when you are overly anxious to drink."

Guo DaLu had been staring at the dog's corpse also. He lifted up his head and addressed He FengYa, "We are not from Guangdong. Why would you invite us to eat dog meat?"

Wang Dong glanced over at He FengYa. Without a hint of expression on his face, he said nonchalantly, "I have heard that the meat from a black dog is the most nutritious."

Lin TaiPing lips formed a cold smile. "Perhaps this isn't a black dog, but one wearing a set of black clothes."

He FengYa's face was still unreadable as he slowly rose from where he was sitting. Wiping at the splatters of wine on his clothes, he said, "Please sit for a moment. I shall go change my clothes and will return momentarily."

Guo DaLu looked over at Wang Dong. "He said he will return momentarily."

Wang Dong: "You heard him."

Guo DaLu: "Do you believe him?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because he cannot go anywhere. He will change behind that [bamboo] curtain."

He FengYa stared at him in silence. For a long time, he did not say a word and his gaze never shifted. Unhurriedly, he

turned around, picked up some chests that had been behind him, and walked behind the curtain.

The curtain hung from the middle of the sitting room. Everyone else's attention was fixed upon that curtain; Guo DaLu's was focused on DiaoShi.

DiaoShi's little face had drained of color. Guo DaLu suddenly winked at him again and smiled as he asked, "Why are you two not changing as well?"

DiaoShi stammered, "I... I did not bring any clothes."

Guo DaLu grinned at him. "If this place doesn't have any clothes for you to change into, can you not go home to change?"

DiaoShi's face brightened immediately. Grabbing SaoSu's hand, they kicked up their feet and ran away quickly.

Yan Qi let out a little chuckle. "It seems that, though his skin may be thick, his heart is not black [*i.e. not cruel]." As he gazed at Guo DaLu, his eyes were filled with gentleness. But as he turned his head, the look in his eyes and the expression on his face turned icy cold.

He FengYa had emerged from behind the curtain. He really had changed into different clothing. Black clothing.

Black clothing, black pants, a black cloth covering his face. Even the sword that he carried on his back was sheathed in a black scabbard.

A sword, four feet seven inches in length.

A sword, four feet seven inches in length.

Outraged, Lin TaiPing cried, "It is you! You didn't die."

The black-clothed man replied coldly, "Only because you do not know how to kill, nor are you able."

Lin TaiPing's face turned pale, then flushed with color. He truly was one who did not know how to take the life of another human being. After committing the deed, he did not even check if the person was truly dead or not.

Black-clothed man: "If you really knew how to kill, even if I was actually dead, you should still have stabbed my corpse a few times."

Lin TaiPing grated his teeth together as he spat out, "I have learned now."

Black-clothed man: "You cannot learn it. Those who are not able to kill will never learn how to. Killing requires talent."

Yan Qi spoke up, "From what you're saying, could it be that you have a natural talent for killing?"

Black-clothed man: "Passable."

Laughing, Yan Qi replied coldly, "If you, sir, really were that talented, we would all be dead by now."

The black-clothed man pondered his words for a moment. "You should all be thanking the dog for the fact that you are still alive."

Yan Qi looked over at Guo DaLu. "I just realized something."

Guo DaLu: "What's that?"

Yan Qi: "At the very least, he does have a talent for killing dogs. After all, he did just kill one."

Guo DaLu blinked. "I just discovered something as well."

Yan Qi: "What?"

Guo DaLu: "He is not NanGong Chou."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because he's not ugly [*the word, chou in NanGong Chou's name means ugly]."

Wang Dong interrupted them. "Just because the name is NanGong Chou, does not mean the person has to be ugly."

Guo DaLu chuckled. "True. Just like someone named Wang Dong may not necessarily like to move [*dong means to move]."

Wang Dong: "Correct answer."

Guo DaLu: "However, his face also does not have a scar."

It was well known by many in jianghu that, though NanGong Chou may have been lucky enough to escape from beneath the Fierce Crucifix Sword with his life, a cross shape had still been cut into his face. That is why he never let anyone see his face.

Wang Dong: "Who has actually seen that NanGong Chou has a scar on his face?"

Guo DaLu: "In any case, I know I have not seen it."

Wang Dong: "Since he never shows his true appearance, how could anyone have seen his face?"

Guo DaLu giggled. "That's true. Maybe his scar is on his buttocks."

The black-clothed man had been watching their whole exchange unemotionally but now, he suddenly cut in, "You

are only correct about one point.”

Guo DaLu: “Which point?”

Black-clothed man: “I do not kill people, only dogs.”

Guo DaLu said with a laugh, “It turns out you are quite honest.”

Black-clothed man: “I just killed one. You will be the second.”

The night was very still. It was a perfect “moonless, windy night of murder.”

Aside from them, the mountain originally did not have many living people on it – perhaps this night, there would be one less. Perhaps, there would be four less.

There were trees in the courtyard. The wind was blowing. The trees were swaying.

But the black-clothed man was not moving. He stood there in silence, as if he had melded into this night of murder. There was nobody who would not acknowledge that he truly was a person who killed. His whole body radiated a murderous air. The sword had not yet left its scabbard, yet that deadly air already had.

Guo DaLu was still inside, slowly removing his outer clothes. The black-clothed man was outside waiting for him and seemed as if he was not the least bit anxious.

Out of the blue, Guo DaLu laughed. “This guy really does have some patience.”

Wang Dong: “You must have patience to kill someone.”

Guo DaLu: “Patience cannot kill anyone.”

Wang Dong: "You deliberately wanted to make him anxious. But if he doesn't get anxious, you will get anxious. Once you become anxious, he will have an opportunity to kill you."

Guo DaLu let out another little laugh. "That is why I'm not anxious."

Yan Qi's eyes had been fixed on him the whole time. He suddenly piped up, "Not only do you not need to be anxious, you don't need to go out there alone either."

Guo DaLu: "I may be thick-skinned, but I'm not a coward."

Yan Qi: "We do not need to concern ourselves with morality and principles of jianghu when dealing with people like him."

Guo DaLu: "You want to fight him four against one?"

Yan Qi: "Why not?"

Guo DaLu sighed. "I really wish we could, but unfortunately, I'm a man."

Yan Qi lowered his head. "But do you... do you have confidence you can beat him?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Yan Qi: "Then you..."

Guo DaLu interrupted him. Smiling, he said, "I must go if I am confident, and I must go even if I am not confident. It is the same as, when you have money, you have to go drinking, but even if you don't have money, you still will go."

Wang Dong laughed. "This analogy's logic may be complete bullcr*p, but it does illustrate one point."

Yan Qi: "What point?"

Wang Dong: "Some things, you have no choice but to just go ahead and do it."

Lin TaiPing suddenly spoke up. "Alright. You go. If he kills you, I will avenge you."

Guo DaLu let out a laugh and patted him on the shoulder. "You may be a b*stard, but you have loyalty to your friends."

All of a sudden, Yan Qi tugged on his hand and whispered, "Stand further away from him. His sword is not long."

Smiling, Guo DaLu answered, "Don't worry. I won't be fooled." He walked outside.

Yan Qi heaved a sigh. "I don't understand. Why do some people have to force themselves to pose as heroes?"

Wang Dong replied lightly, "Perhaps he already is a hero – some people were born as heroes."

Lin TaiPing sighed as well. "True. Regardless of whether he is a drunk or a b*stard, he is indeed a hero. One hundred percent a hero."

Yan Qi exhaled another loud breath as he murmured, "Sadly, the majority of heroes die young."

Guo DaLu was already outside in the courtyard. He really was standing a long ways away from the black-clothed man.

Black-clothed man: "Where is your sword?"

Guo DaLu chuckled. "My sword has already been sent into the pawnshop."

With a cold laugh, the black-clothed man asked, "You dare to face me with your bare hands?"

Responding with another snicker, Guo DaLu answered, "Since I am going to die, it might as well be a faster death. That way I won't have to suffer for so long and endure the pains of poverty."

Black-clothed man: "Fine. As you please." The word, "fine" had just left his lips, before he was already reaching behind to unsheathe his sword. His hand had just contacted the hilt when Guo DaLu darted toward him unexpectedly.

Yan Qi's heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

Did Guo DaLu really want to meet a quicker death? He knew that the enemy was using a short sword, so why would he still rush forward and present himself for death?

Sword light flashed. The sword had left its sheathe.

It was not a short sword; it was a long sword.

The sword light filled the air with beams of rainbows, the brightness blurring their vision. But Guo DaLu was already right in front of the black-clothed man's chest. He could not see the sword, could not see the sword light. His eyesight had not been affected.

Even though he did not see the black-clothed man's sword, he caught sight of his weakness. He saw it clearly.

"Bang!" The black-clothed man's body was sent flying through the air. His body was soaring backwards, but the sword light flew forwards. He crashed into the wall at the

back; the sword stabbed into the tree in front. He toppled down onto the ground and then was motionless.

Guo DaLu stood where he was, looking down at his fist with an astonished and perplexed expression. It was as if he himself had not believed that he could defeat his opponent in one punch.

The others had not believed it either. Yan Qi, especially, had not thought it could happen. He stood in shock for a long while before rushing over to Guo DaLu, as feelings of amazement, delight, and even a little fear filled him. Beaming, he scolded, "I told you to stay further away from him. Why did you deliberately rush towards him instead?"

Guo DaLu answered with a smile, "Maybe it was because I'm a fool." His smile did look somewhat idiotic. But, naturally, he was not the least bit foolish – when you think that he is a fool, he will become intelligent, and in fact, much more intelligent than most people.

Yan Qi laughed. "Who said you are a fool? It's just that, I don't understand. How did you see that he was not going to use a short sword this time?"

Guo DaLu: "I couldn't see. I guessed."

Yan Qi paused a moment in surprise. "What if you guessed wrong?"

Guo DaLu: "I knew I would not be wrong."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

With a wide grin, Guo DaLu replied, "Because my luck has always been good."

Yan Qi was silent for a little while again before bursting out in laughter. He guffawed, "You may not be a fool, but you are not honest either. Not one bit honest."

Guo DaLu really was not honest. He knew how to act the part of a fool.

Of course he could tell that this occasion, the black-clothed man was not using a short sword. That was because this time, the sword hilt was carried at the left shoulder, but the man had used his right hand to draw the sword. As he drew it out of its sheathe, he had pulled back his chest and stomach, and all his strength had been placed in front. Hence, a vulnerable point had appeared between his abdomen and chest.

Guo DaLu observed this weakness. He attacked, and with one punch, struck that point.

So long as your observation is precise and your judgement is accurate, one punch is enough. There is no need for a second one. In a battle between two martial arts experts, the first punch is the most significant. If that first blow does not bring down the opponent, then you may be the one who is defeated instead.

The distinction between victory and defeat is often determined in the blink of an eye – and more often than not, is decided in a moment's consideration.

Yan Qi cut in, "There is still something I don't understand."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "His arm is much shorter than that sword. How is he able to draw his sword in one quick motion?"

Guo DaLu contemplated over that for a while, then chuckled and replied, "I don't understand either."

Wang Dong: "I understand." He walked over to them. In his hand was the black-clothed man's scabbard.

Yan Qi took ahold of it and looked it over. Chuckling in amusement, he stated, "I understand too."

Anyone who took a close look at the scabbard would understand. Inside, there were actually two swords: one long sword, one short sword. Yan Qi had figured this out long ago. He had never considered, however, that this was actually not a real scabbard but two pieces of wood cramped together. The sword was not 'drawn' out of the top but instead, was wielded out the side.

Yan Qi laughed. "This is the same as an egg."

Guo DaLu was taken aback. "An egg?"

Yan Qi: "Do you know how to stand an egg on the table?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Yan Qi: "Idiot. All you need to do is crack and knock in the wider head of the egg. Then, the egg can rest on that end unsupported."

Guo DaLu laughed appreciatively. "You are such a genius. I can't believe you thought up such a method."

There are many things in life that truly are just like an egg: something that you think is tremendously complicated will often turn out to be extremely simple.

Some people are also like an egg: no matter how pathetic a person is, all you need to do is knock him hard over the head

and he will stand himself back up again.

A grave had been added into the courtyard – a dog's grave.

Yan Qi personally laid the dog into the coffin. Sighing gloomily, he lamented, "You came here in the coffin, now you depart in the coffin once again. If you had known this would be the outcome, why would you still come?"

Guo DaLu answered with a bitter smile on his face, "If he had not come, we would be the ones departing in the coffin."

Lin TaiPing exhaled loudly. "When he arrived, I had given him a hard kick. Who knew he would end up saving our lives?"

Wang Dong: "Dogs are not like humans. They do not harbor grudges. All they remember is the kindness they have been shown."

Guo DaLu: "True. You only need to give a dog one bone and the next time, it will be wagging its tail when it sees you. But there are some ungrateful people out there who, no matter how much mercy you have shown to them, will turn around and stab you in the back. Therefore..."

Lin TaiPing continued, "Therefore, dogs value loyalty and honor more than people. Or at least, more so than certain people."

Guo DaLu: "That's why we should erect a tombstone in his honor."

Lin TaiPing: "What should be written on it?"

Guo DaLu: "Tomb of the righteous canine."

Yan Qi shook his head in disagreement. “‘Righteous canine is not good enough. Don’t forget, he is the savior of all of our lives...”

Wang Dong: “The tombstone can wait until later, but the funeral oration must be given now.”

Guo DaLu: “You know how to write funeral orations?”

Wang Dong nodded. He suddenly arose and recited loudly
[*Note, in the original Chinese, the oration rhymes, but my translation skills aren’t good enough to capture both the meaning and the rhyming],

“Within the coffin lies a dog
Kind friend, loyal comrade
Should you not have come, we would have gone
Every first and fifteenth [of the month]
[For you] Fragrant flowers and honoring wine
A tragic loss...”

A pig should not be too plump; a person should not be too smart. The fattest pig is always the first to be slaughtered. If a person wants to live a happier life, he should have a bit of silliness and do some foolish things. This does not mean that the person really is a fool.

Needless to say, they all knew that cats do not cook and dogs do not know how to climb into a coffin and close the lid. That dog and cat had to have an owner. Who could that be?

Yan Qi: “This person must have known that NanGong Chou is not dead when he sent the coffin here.”

Guo DaLu: “Correct. He sent the coffin here for the purpose of letting us know that NanGong Chou is still alive.”

Yan Qi nodded in agreement. "He likely knew about NanGong Chou's evil plot."

Guo DaLu: "But why would he not just tell us outright?"

Yan Qi: "Because he doesn't want us to see him."

Lin TaiPing: "Why? If he intends us no harm, why would his actions have to be so sneaky?"

Guo DaLu: "It seems to me that this person is actually a woman."

Yan Qi: "What makes you think that?"

Guo DaLu: "Only a woman would do something so sneakily and without rhyme or reason."

Glowering at him, Yan Qi retorted, "Women have to do those sorts of things only because men use even less rhyme or reason."

Guo DaLu snorted. "Don't forget, you are a man too."

Wang Dong was staring at Yan Qi. He suddenly lectured, "It is an innate instinct for men to look down upon women and for women to look down on men. It is one of those unchangeable principles of life. It was like that thousands of years ago and will be like that thousands of years from now. So..."

Yan Qi: "So what?"

Wang Dong: "So there is not much to debate in this issue. I don't understand why you guys always have such an interest in this topic." He let out a long breath. "I had enough issues as it was. Now there is one more."

Guo DaLu: "What issue is that?"

Wan Dong: "NanGong Chou."

Nan GongChou was not dead because no one had been willing to kill him. None of them wanted to take another person's life, especially a person that had already been defeated. There was one thing NanGong Chou had gotten correct: "Some people are born without the ability to kill. Furthermore, they will never be able to learn it."

Guo DaLu: "Very true. He is an issue."

Lin TaiPing: "But haven't we already locked him up?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Lin TaiPing: "Are you concerned that he will escape?"

Guo DaLu: "He is not able to escape." Anyone who has been tied up like a zongzi⁹ will not have any hope of escaping.

Lin TaiPing: "If he cannot get away, what is the issue?"

Guo DaLu: "That is exactly the problem. Since he cannot escape, we have to watch over him, right?"

Lin TaiPing nodded in agreement.

With a cynical smile, Guo DaLu explained, "We can barely support ourselves. How can we feed another person?"

Lin TaiPing finally understood. His brow knit together as he suggested, "Maybe we should let him go."

Guo DaLu: "We can't let that type of person go free."

Lin TaiPing: "Well, that means we will have to support him for the rest of his life."

Guo DaLu: "That is why there is an issue."

Yan Qi piped in unexpectedly, "We can make him support himself."

Guo DaLu's eyes lit up immediately in excitement. "Of course! He is much wealthier than we are."

Yan Qi: "At the very least, he just made a large sum off of Feng QiWu."

Rising to his feet, Guo DaLu announced, "I am going to go ask him where he hid all the treasures."

Yan Qi: "Will you be able to get him to reveal anything?"

Guo DaLu: "I may not be JiaGun, but I have my own methods."

A laugh slipped out from Yan Qi. "It looks like this guy has learned a few things off of JiaGun."

End of Chapter 11

Chapter 12 - Men and Cats

In the rear courtyard, there was a firewood shed.

It seemed that firewood sheds were not used to store firewood but rather, to hold prisoners. Every household that captured a thief seemed to wind up locking him in the firewood shed.

This firewood shed had spiders, mice, dog feces, cat urine, broken pots and bowls, leftover cinders... It had nearly everything you could think of, everything except for firewood. There was not a single log inside.

Nor was there a single person.

NanGong Chou, who had been bound up like a zongzi, was gone. All that remained was a pile of rope on the ground.

Guo DaLu stared at the scene in surprise for a long while. He picked up a piece of the severed rope and looked it over. "It was sliced through with a knife."

Yan Qi: "And it was a fast blade." Only a fast blade could slice through rope and leave such a straight and smooth cut.

Lin TaiPing's brow creased as he thought out loud, "If that is the case, then that means he did not break out by himself. Somebody must have come to rescue him."

Guo DaLu snorted, "I cannot believe that someone like him would have friends."

Yan Qi: "Do you think it could have been those two little rascals?"

Guo DaLu: "Couldn't have been. They neither have the ability or the courage. And..." he suddenly snickered, "kids have something in common with women."

Yan Qi: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: "Kids do not talk loyalty... they don't understand what it is."

Yan Qi eyes glared daggers at him, but Lin TaiPing had already interrupted, "Could it have been Golden-Coat Pekingese?"

Guo DaLu: "Why would you suddenly think of him?"

Lin TaiPing answered, "That day, I never did see Golden-Coat Pekingese. Maybe NanGong Chou had already set them free, or maybe they were in cahoots the whole time."

Guo DaLu shook his head in disagreement. "Given the type of person that NanGong Chou is, he may have the gall to do anything, but there is one thing that he will never do."

Lin TaiPing: "What would that be?"

Guo DaLu: "He would never leave someone around to share the loot with him." He let out a laugh before explaining further, "If there were three bowls of rice on the table, even if he was full and could not eat any more, he still would not leave a single bowl for anyone else. He would rather explode and eat every last bit himself."

Lin TaiPing queried, "You suspect that he has already murdered JiaGun and Golden-Coat Pekingese?"

Guo DaLu nodded a quick response. "I'm hungry." This statement was completely unrelated to anything they had

just been talking about. You would never have thought that, in such a situation, anyone would say something like that.

Lin TaiPing gawked at him with wide eyes. Wang Dong and Yan Qi's had fixed their gaze intently on him also, as if they wanted to analyze him to see if this person was made-up of something different from other people.

Guo DaLu gave a little chuckle. "I realized I was hungry when I was talking about those three bowls of rice. Then, when I actually started talking about eating the rice, I remembered that none of you had eaten for at least most of the day."

Wang Dong: "Your mind wanders to whatever you are talking about, doesn't it?"

Guo DaLu: "It seems like it."

Wang Dong: "So when you start talking about dog feces, will you need to go..." Guo DaLu sprinted outside before the sentence was even finished - towards the toilet.

Wang Dong stared after him, his eyes bulging in astonishment. Yan Qi heaved a lengthy sigh but could not help giggling, "That guy is a real prodigy."

Lin TaiPing chortled, "A prodigy such as this one, there are not many in the world."

Yan Qi: "Not only are there not many, I suspect that there is only one."

Wang Dong finally recovered from his shock. He sighed, "Thank goodness there is only one."

This was also a conclusion.

If there were more people like Guo DaLu out there, the world would very likely be a happier place.

Among all animals, the one most intimate with humans would likely be the dog or the cat. Some people would rather raise a dog, others think that there is no difference between having a dog or a cat.

In reality, there is a significant distinction between the two. Cats are different from dogs: they do not take pleasure in running around outside. Cats enjoy lazing around the house and especially lounging by the fire. They love eating fish, particularly the fish's head. They also like lying in your arms as you gently stroke their neck and ears. If, everyday, you feed a cat on a regular schedule and gently rub it, it will grow to be extremely fond of you and will become your friend.

But do not think that it just loves you, that it belongs only to you. Cats are not faithful as dogs are. The instant there is no fish left in your dish, it will sneak off to another person's house and furthermore, will become that person's friend. The next time you see your cat, it may not recognize you and in fact, may have already forgotten who you are.

Cats, of course, do not look as vicious as dogs, but they are much crueller. When a cat catches a mouse, even if it is starving, it will not eat the mouse in one gulp. It will first toy with the mouse until the creature is dizzy and shaky before slowly savoring it.

The "hands and feet" of a cat are soft and supple. Not a sound is heard when it walks. But should you provoke it, those soft "hands" will suddenly bare a set of sharp claws that will scratch you until your face is bleeding.

If cats are not like dogs, then what are they like?

Have you ever seen a woman? Have you watched how a woman eats fish? Observed her when she lies in her husband or lover's arms?

Do you know why many men's faces have scratches on them? Do you know why some men commit suicide? Or go insane?

If you say a cat is like a woman, then you are wrong. In actual fact, cats are not like women, but rather, many women are similar to cats.

This cat was black. Its coat was shiny and smooth, so that the black color glistened. Guo DaLu was scrutinizing the cat carefully.

A person who is lightheaded from hunger is not in the mood for studying cats. A starving person is not in the mood for studying anything. Obviously Guo DaLu had already eaten his fill. As with the previous day, food had been laden on the table and they heard the cat ringing the bell.

Guo DaLu suddenly observed, "This cat looks well fed, and moreover, has always been well fed. A cat that has constantly suffered from hunger would not look like this one."

Yan Qi chuckled as he asked, "You have been analyzing it for the large part of a day and that was what you were studying?"

Ignoring him, Guo DaLu carried on, "Supposing that all these household items, this food, and the coffin were all sent by

this person, whom we will call Mr. Nice, then this cat must be his as well. So..."

Yan Qi: "So what?"

Guo DaLu: "So this Mr. Nice's house must be very well-off and lavish, otherwise the cat would not be so well fed and healthy."

Yan Qi blinked in confusion. "So what does that have to do with anything?"

Guo DaLu: "If I was a cat and I had such a rich owner, I would not want to go with anyone else."

Yan Qi: "Therefore..."

Guo DaLu: "Therefore, if we let the cat loose, it should run back to where its owner is."

Yan Qi's eyes lit up with excitement as he asked, "So why are you still holding onto it?"

Petting the cat lightly on its neck, Guo DaLu murmured, "Brother Cat, oh Brother Cat. If you lead us to your owner, I will promise I will feed you fish heads every day." He set the cat down outside of the door.

But to their surprise, the cat gave a "meow," jumped back into his arms, and began licking him lightly on the hand.

Yan Qi: "I think that this cat must be a female, and it looks like she fancies you."

Guo DaLu picked the cat up by the back of its neck and set it back down on the ground. The cat still stayed next to him. Guo DaLu frowned. "Why will you not leave? Don't you miss your owner? He has always treated you well."

Wang Dong let out an unexpected laugh as he stated, "A cat's memory may not be very good but its mind is clear."

Perplexed, Guo DaLu echoed, "Mind is clear?"

Wang Dong clarified for them, "Since it knows that there is good fish to eat here, why would it run off to anywhere else?"

Guo DaLu: "But I'm not its owner. Why is it following me?"

Wang Dong: "You fed it some fish just now, didn't you?"

Guo DaLu nodded.

Wang Dong: "Whoever feeds it fish, whoever is its owner."

Lin TaiPing all of a sudden spoke up, "What if there is no fish here to eat?"

Wang Dong: "Then he might go home."

Lin TaiPing chuckled, "I just hope this cat recognizes the way home."

The cat did know how to go home. No matter where it was, if it did not have anything eat, it would very quickly be able to find the route back.

Afternoon.

From the morning to the afternoon, there had been nothing to eat. Regardless of cat or human, no one would be able to withstand the hunger. By now, even if Guo DaLu wanted to cuddle the cat in his arms, the cat would not allow it. Like a wisp of smoke, it scampered away.

Guo DaLu chased after it. Yan Qi followed Guo DaLu, while Lin TaiPing trailed behind Yan Qi.

Wang Dong: "It would be best if you didn't follow too closely."

Lin TaiPing: "What about you?"

Wang Dong did not respond but instead, gave a sigh, as if Lin TaiPing's question was terribly stupid. He lay down.

On the left of the mountainside was a lonely graveyard.

Even during Qing Ming Jie¹⁰, very few people came to sweep the tombs here. Those buried here were people who, when they were alive, had not been noticed and when they died, were quickly forgotten. The poor usually do not have many friends or relatives to begin with, let alone the deceased poor. Guo DaLu would often feel emotional and sorrowful when he came here. But today, he did not have time for sorrow.

The cat was running away quickly. It scurried speedily into the graveyard, then darted out again. From far away, it looked like a trail of black smoke.

Anyone who is chasing a cat will realize that it is not an easy thing to do. Your attention is only focused on the pursuit so that you cannot afford the time to think about other matters.

The same goes for pursuing girls. Or perhaps the reason why anyone would chase them is because no time was afforded to think. If they actually took the time to think through it carefully, they would turn around and abandon the chase.

Next to the graveyard was a grove of trees. Within the grove was a quaint wooden house. It was a grove of date trees. The house was constructed of wood from these trees. Guo DaLu had roamed through the grove before, but he had never

seen this little house. It seemed that it had only been built within the last couple of days.

The cat darted through the trees and suddenly disappeared. Waves of delicious aromas drifted out to them from within the house. It was the smell of simmering pork.

Guo DaLu wiggled his nose, a smile appearing on his face.

A fire burned inside the house. Meat was stewing over the fire. An old man squatted next to it, fanning the flames while an elderly lady poured a thick sauce into the pot. Crouching off to the side was a long-haired girl who kept hurrying the two of them.

The cat dashed into the house, straight into the girl's arms. She was obviously this cat's owner. Guo DaLu had finally found the person he had been searching for.

His chase had just taken him to the door of the house when she turned her head around. Their eyes met. Both were startled with whom they saw.

Then Guo DaLu cried out, "Sour Plum Soup, it is you?"

The pork had been stewed until it was soft and had been cut into cubes. As it turned out, each cube was the perfect size for Guo DaLu to eat in one mouthful.

The cat lay by Sour Plum Soup's feet. This was a very easygoing cat. It did not insist on eating fish and did not protest to eating simmered pork. When the belly is empty, be it human or cat, he will not refuse simmered pork.

Guo DaLu gulped down seven or eight pieces before he finally sighed, "Even in my dreams, I would never have thought it would be you."

Sour Plum Soup pursed her lips in a little smile.

Guo DaLu: "Is everything that you do always cloaked in mystery like this?"

Sour Plum Soup lowered her head and smiled again. "I had wanted to give everything to all of you personally, but I was afraid that you would not accept."

Guo DaLu replied coldly, "There was no need for you to give us all those things."

Sour Plum Soup: "You helped me out a lot. I had to find some way to express my gratitude."

Guo DaLu: "But we still cannot accept all those things."

Sour Plum Soup: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because... because you're a woman."

Sour Plum Soup: "Women are people too."

Guo DaLu shot a look over at Yan Qi and chortled, "Her manner of speaking is similar to yours."

Yan Qi, a dark expression on his face, said "We would not accept if a man gave us that many gifts either."

Guo DaLu continued for him, "And plus, we already feel embarrassed that we have eaten several meals from you."

Sour Plum Soup blinked. "Well, let's just say that I am storing all that stuff at your place."

Wang Dong: "Then you will need to pay rent."

Sour Plum Soup: "I'll pay it."

Wang Dong: "And a storage fee."

Sour Plum Soup: "I will pay that as well."

Wang Dong: "Ten liang of silver per day."

Sour Plum Soup: "Alright."

Wang Dong: "You have to pre-pay."

Sour Plum Soup giggled, "I'll pre-pay ten days, is that okay?" She reached in and pulled out a silver ingot of one hundred liang.

Wang Dong did not move. He only gazed at that big silver ingot as if mesmerized.

Guo DaLu and the others, though, were staring at Wang Dong. They were starting to discover that this guy was absolutely absurd and unreasonable. Someone had, out of the kindness of her heart, given them food to eat, chairs to sit on, beds to sleep on, and even decorated their rundown house so that it looked like new, but he still wanted charge her rent and even wanted it prepaid.

"This frigging guy is an absolute b*stard! " The words nearly slipped out of Guo DaLu's mouth as he glared at Wang Dong.

Wang Dong's eyes had left the ingot and were now fixed on Sour Plum Soup. He suddenly said, "Are you sick?"

Sour Plum Soup paused in shock. "Sick?"

Wang Dong: "Not just sick. Seriously sick."

Sour Plum Soup: "I am eating well and sleeping fine. How could I be sick?"

Wang Dong: "Maybe your sickness has arisen because you eat too much." His face did not show any emotion. "You spent money to buy all those things, put in a lot of effort just

to send them here, and now, you are perfectly willing to pay rent to me. If you were not sick, why would you do such things?"

Guo DaLu guffawed. He was starting think that Sour Plum Soup really was sick, and in fact, was very sick.

Sour Plum Soup's eyes flickered between them. "Would you believe me if I told you the reason why I did it was because I felt I am indebted to you for your kindness?"

Wang Dong looked over at Guo DaLu. "Do you believe her?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Wang Dong: "If even he doesn't believe you, I don't think anyone in the world will believe you."

Sour Plum Soup let out a sigh. "That's why I did not say that."

Guo DaLu: "So what are you planning on saying?"

Sour Plum Soup's eyes darted back and forth. She nibbled on her lip nervously and asked, "If a man fancies a woman and wants to marry her, will he do many strange and unreasonable things?"

Wang Dong: "Yes." A man would nearly do anything for the woman he loves.

Sour Plum Soup: "Women are the same." She carried on, "If a woman likes a man and wants to marry him, she, too, will do many strange and unreasonable things." Her face suddenly flushed red as she lowered her eyes and whispered, "I... I am eighteen this year."

An eighteen year old girl's mind will usually turn to one thing: marriage. What eighteen year old girl is not filled with thoughts of romance? This is very natural.

Guo DaLu laughed again. "You are not sick. A boy who has come of age should take a wife; a girl who has matured should marry a husband." He thrust out his chest confidently. "But who is it you have taken a fancy to?"

Yan Qi threw a look of daggers at him and answered for her in a cold tone, "Of course it must be you."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "Well, not necessarily." His lips may have said "not necessarily" but the expression on his face was one of certainty. A man like him was not easy to find. Even if you banged loudly on a gong, one may not show up. If Sour Plum Soup was not attracted to him, who else could she be attracted to?

At that moment, Sour Plum Soup's eyes were actually on him, but she was shaking her head. Hiding her mouth behind her hand, she giggled, "Perhaps it is you, perhaps it isn't you. I cannot tell you right now."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Sour Plum Soup: "Because right now is not the appropriate time."

Guo DaLu: "When will be the appropriate time?"

They could see her eyes moving beneath her eyelids. With her head lowered, she murmured, "I still have to observe to see if he truly is very good. This is an important decision in my life. I cannot afford to not be exceptionally careful."

Guo DaLu: "You still haven't been able to figure it out?"

Sour Plum Soup: "I... I still want to wait, to observe a bit more."

In a flat voice, Yan Qi interrupted, "From what I see, you should observe a bit quicker. Someone is already anxious to death."

Guo DaLu smiled. "It doesn't matter. Take your time and observe. A good person will always be a good person. The more you observe, the better he looks."

Sour Plum Soup chimed sweetly, "When I have finished observing and have figured it out, you will definitely be the first one I tell."

Yan Qi stood up unexpectedly, turned his head, and walked out.

Guo DaLu called, "Why are you leaving? We are all chatting here. You don't find it nice?"

Yan Qi: "What is there to chat about?"

Guo DaLu: "You have nothing to say at all?"

Yan Qi: "I have only one sentence that I want to say." He did not even turn his head as he stated, "Girls nowadays are getting more and more brazen."

Yan Qi: "I have only one sentence that I want to say." He did not even turn his head as he stated, "Girls nowadays are getting more and more brazen."

Guo DaLu watched as he walked out before shaking his head. Smiling, he apologized, "That guy's temperament may be a little eccentric, but he is a good person. Suan guniang [*guniang = "Miss;" a form of address for a young woman;

recall that Sour Plum Soup in pinyin is Suan MeiTang], please do not be angry with him.”

In a sweet voice, Sour Plum Soup said, “My surname is not Suan. It is Mei.”

Guo Dalu asked, “The ‘mei’ in plum blossoms [*mei hua = plum blossoms]?”

She nodded. “My name is Mei RuNan.”

Guo DaLu chuckled, “There’s plum blossoms and orchids in your name. Practically enough flowers to open a flower shop.”

She giggled as she corrected, “Not ‘lan’ as in orchid [*lan hua = orchid]. It is ‘nan’ as in man [*nan ren = male/man].”

Guo DaLu repeated, “Mei RuNan. This name is a tad strange.”

Mei RuNan explained, “Xian fu [*respectful way to refer to one’s own father who has passed away] gave me this name with the intention of reminding me, ‘You must be like a man. You cannot be indecisive. If you want to do something, do it. If you want to say something, just say it.’ ”

Wang Dong all of a sudden remarked, “Should the spirit of your father in the netherworld be aware of things here, he will certainly be extremely pleased.”

Mei RuNan: “Why is that?”

Wang Dong: “Because you definitely have lived up to the expectations he placed on you.”

Mei RuNan blushed. “You...you really think that I act like a man?”

Wang Dong: “You’re a woman?”

Mei RuNan had to laugh.

Guo DaLu joined in with the laughter. “The way you do things truly is more manly than even some men out there. For example...” He dropped his voice down to a low whisper, “... our friend, Yan Qi, sometimes behaves like a woman. Not only is he a little sissy at times, he also will frequently throw tantrums for no reason.”

Mei RuNan asked him, “Do you think women frequently get angry without any reason?”

Guo DaLu did not answer and only smiled.

Mei RuNan: “Women are the same as men. If they are upset, there is a reason behind it. It’s just that men don’t know what that reason is.” A little giggle escaped as she added, “In reality, men are not as smart as they think they are.”

Guo Dalu wanted to say something, but he held his words back. He had resolved not to argue with her. If he was to argue, he would wait until she had revealed who she had a crush on. He would then inform her that, even though men may not be as smart as they thought of themselves, they were at least much smarter than she realized. And by then, she would believe him for sure.

A grin had spread on his face as if he could already imagine that tender, glorious moment when Sour Plum Soup would lie in his embrace and tell him that he was “the one.”

“Then she’ll know who the truly smart one is.” Guo DaLu was grinning so widely he practically could not close his mouth.

Lin TaiPing was beaming also. Was he envisioning the same scene for himself?

A man who does not know how to intoxicate himself with his own fantasies cannot be considered a real man. Perhaps, it can even be said that he cannot be considered a real person. Humans are superior to other beasts because of their ability to capture themselves within their own imagination.

Mei RuNan suddenly broke into the daydream. "Actually, it is not a bad thing to be slightly effeminate."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Mei RuNan: "At least those types of guys usually are not uncivilized or boorish and in fact, are often more gentle and considerate."

Guo DaLu stood up unexpectedly. With his hips swaying back and forth, he walked outside. Turning his head, he addressed Wang Dong, "Do you think I am a little effeminate?"

Wang Dong: "You are a man?"

Laughing loudly, Guo DaLu replied, "I thought I was, but now, I am a little unclear myself."

Moon. The moon was very bright. The round moon hung above the treetop.

Yan Qi sat alone beneath the tree, staring off into the distance. Walking over, Guo DaLu sat next to him. Yan Qi's brow creased into a scowl, and he glared wide-eyed at him as he snapped, "What do you want here?"

Guo DaLu: "To chat."

Yan Qi's face darkened. "What do you have to chat with me about? Why don't you go find that Mei guniang?"

Rubbing his chin, Guo DaLu observed, "You do not seem to be very fond of her."

Yan Qi: "There are plenty of people already who are fond of her. There is no need to add me into that number."

Guo DaLu did not say anything.

Yan Qi threw another fierce stare at him. "You guys seemed to be enjoying yourselves during your conversation this afternoon."

Guo DaLu: "Mm."

Yan Qi: "So if you were having so much fun, why are you bothering to come find me now?"

Guo DaLu suddenly burst out in laughter. "You're sipping vinegar [*a way of saying that someone is jealous, usually of a rival in romance]."

Yan Qi's face seemed to turn red for a brief instant. "Vinegar? Who would I be jealous of?"

A knowing grin on his lips, Guo DaLu answered, "You know the one that she likes has to be me but you really like her, so..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Yan Qi stood up to leave. Guo DaLu reached for his hand, but Yan Qi shook it off. Grabbing his hand again, Guo DaLu said, "I came here to talk to you about serious matters."

Frowning, Yan Qi retorted, "Serious? What type of serious matters could possibly come from your mouth?"

Guo DaLu: "I think you once said that there is a family that lives nearby with the surname of Mei. The young master is called 'Stone Man' Mei RuJia."

Yan Qi: "Yes, I had said that."

End of Chapter 12

Chapter 13 - NanGong Chou's Secret

Guo DaLu: "Do you think Mei RuNan could be Mei Rujia's younger sister?"

Yan Qi: "Whether she is or not has nothing to do with me."

Guo DaLu: "Is there enmity between the Mei family and Feng QiWu?"

Yan Qi: "Not certain."

Guo DaLu: "I think that must be it. That's why Mei RuNan thought up a plan to get rid of Feng QiWu. But does she hold some sort of hatred towards NanGong Chou as well? Was she the one who rescued NanGong Chou? Did she save him because of that lot of treasures?"

Yan Qi: "Why do you not just ask her?"

Guo DaLu exhaled a sigh. "If she did not mention anything herself, even if I ask, I won't get any answers."

Yan Qi gave an icy laugh. "I think you do not dare ask."

Guo DaLu: "I don't dare?"

Yan Qi: "You are afraid of offending her, that she will get angry, so..." He had suddenly closed his mouth, and his face had become long. Guo DaLu turned his head in the direction he had been looking and saw Mei RuNan walking towards them.

A sweet smile filled her face. Her eyes were large and bright. She chimed, "You should be asking me all these things. I would not get angry."

Yan Qi's face was stony as he asked in a cold tone, "You overheard everything that we just said?"

Her head lowered as she explained, "I did not purposely try to eavesdrop. I came to tell you that dinner is ready."

Yan Qi: "What opportune timing for your arrival."

He had already been standing. Now, he turned his head and left. Mei RuNan watched until he was far off into the distance, then gave a sad smile and sighed, "I did not do anything to offend him. Why does he always leave once he sees me?"

Guo DaLu chuckled as he offered, "Maybe it is because he likes you."

Mei RuNan blinked in surprise. "He likes me? But then, why is he avoiding me?"

Guo DaLu: "Perhaps he has already figured out that he is not the person you like." She lowered her head again. A long while passed, then all of a sudden, she began giggling. Guo DaLu asked, "What are you laughing about?"

Mei RuNan pressed her lips together to contain her laughter as she replied, "I am laughing at you men. You never ask the questions that you should be asking, and you never say the words that you should be saying."

Guo DaLu: "Those things that I wanted to ask you, you..."

Mei RuNan cut his sentence off short. Grasping his hand, she smiled and said, "Come on. Let's go have dinner. I will tell you all those things after we are finished eating."

Guo DaLu: "Why can you not tell me now?"

Mei RuNan: "I am afraid that after you finish hearing the answers, you will not have any appetite."

She held Guo DaLu's hand as they walked back into the house. She held it very tightly. When they sat down, it seemed as if she did not want to let go of it. Wang Dong was staring at her hand.

Lin TaiPing was also staring at her hand. Yan Qi was trying to deliberately act as if he did not notice anything, but he, too, could not help stealing several glances. An indescribable feeling of comfort flooded Guo DaLu's heart, which is why he ate particularly well that meal.

As he was wiping his mouth, Mei RuNan suddenly spoke. "Your guess was correct. I am Mei RuJia's younger sister, and Feng QiWu is my family's enemy. But unfortunately, we were never able to find him. Therefore, we thought up this plan."

She gave a little smile, then continued, "We had calculated that GunZi and Golden Lion would be able to fish Feng QiWu out from his place of hiding. They are government officers, so naturally it would be much easier for them to search for someone." At this time, she let out a sigh. "Up to this point, your speculations were not the least bit wrong."

Guo DaLu queried, "What about everything after?"

Mei RuNan: "Everything after, you were completely wrong."

Guo DaLu was silent for a second from surprise. "What points did we guess incorrectly?"

Mei RuNan: "Number one: the black-clothed man is not NanGong Chou."

Gou DaLu: "If he is not NanGong Chou, then who is he?"

Mei RuNan was biting down on her own lip. A long time passed before she finally gathered the resolve to say, "My older brother."

Mei RuNan was biting down on her own lip. A long time passed before she finally gathered the resolve to say, "My older brother."

When she said this, everyone was struck with astonishment. Guo DaLu could barely prevent himself from crying out. Even Lin TaiPing could not help exclaiming, "Your brother? Why would he do something like that?"

She hung her head low as she explained, "Everyone within jianghu thinks that we, the Mei family, are an old and well-known family within wulin and, because we have always been quite ostentatious, must have endless wealth. Any friend of jianghu who has come to us for aid has never been disappointed."

The expression on her face grew miserable, and she said sadly, "In reality, even though my family may seem impressive on the outside, on the inside, since my father passed away, we have exhausted our resources. Not only are we not capable of providing financial aid to others, it has been arduous getting through each day in our own lives. And so..."

Wang Dong: "So in addition to wanting Feng QiWu's life, you wanted his money as well."

Mei RuNan gave a slight nod of her head. "Correct. Our plan was to have 'two brushes paint one picture.' While I was here committing burglaries, my older brother had already approached GunZi and Golden Lion and become their bodyguard."

Guo DaLu asked, "But being the shrewd type of people that GunZi and Golden Lion are, how could they just carelessly believe that he was NanGong Chou? And why would they heedlessly use him as their bodyguard?"

Mei RuNan: "One: because they had never seen NanGong Chou before. Two: because my older brother has a memento that once belonged to NanGong Chou. Three: because they never thought someone would try to masquerade as NanGong Chou."

Guo DaLu: "Four: because your luck has been good. But why would your brother have a memento from NanGong Chou?"

Mei RuNan: "Because he is my brother's friend."

With a sigh and a cynical smile, Guo DaLu commented, "It seems that your brother is very talented to be able to befriend such a person."

Mei RuNan's cheeks turned a slight pink as she replied, "He has always been one who likes to make new friends, and he enjoys helping others. There have been countless numbers of people in jianghu who have received favors from him. It is because he has too many friends and is overly generous that our family is getting poorer with each day."

Chuckling, Guo DaLu said, "True. Misers will never lack money to spend. If I had known he was such a person, I would have thrown that one punch of mine a little lighter."

Mei RuNan's face showed displeasure as she stated slowly, "I still have two other things that I must tell you."

Guo DaLu: "Go ahead."

Mei RuNan: "One: I do not appreciate it when people insult my brother to my face. And two: If he had not been using a

weapon that he was not used to, the one taking a beating would have been you, not him.”

“Stone Man” Mei RuJia’s weapon of choice was made of stone. This point Guo DaLu had heard before. He could only respond with a faint smile. “So how is the martial arts of the real NanGong Chou?”

Mei RuNan answered indifferently, “If the person you came across had been the real NanGong Chou, you probably would not be sitting here right now.”

Guo DaLu: “If I wouldn’t be sitting here, where would I be?”

Mei RuNan: “Lying down. Even if you were not lying in a coffin, you would at least be lying on a bed.”

Guo DaLu laughed loudly in response, except his laughter appeared to be a little unnatural.

Mei RuNan had picked up her story again. “Our whole plan had been proceeding very smoothly until...” Her eyes glanced over towards Lin TaiPing.

Lin TaiPing filled in, “Until I accidentally saw him.”

Mei RuNan uttered a sigh. “I really wish that day you guys did not go to the city and did not see him.”

Lin TaiPing: “He was afraid that we would dig deeper into his secret so he decided to kill us.”

Sadness filled her voice as she continued, “He is the only son of our Mei family. He could not let the Mei family name and hundred-year reputation be ruined at his hands.”

Wang Dong lamented, “So he would rather admit to being NanGong Chou than reveal his true identity. And he would

rather die than be disgraced, right?”

Mei RuNan gave a slight nod of her head. Her eyes grew red with tears.

Wang Dong unexpectedly heaved a long sigh also. “To be the only son of an old and respected family in wulin truly comes with sufferings that others cannot understand.”

Wang Dong unexpectedly heaved a long sigh also. “To be the only son of an old and respected family in wulin truly comes with sufferings that others cannot understand.”

Guo DaLu: “There is probably only one person who has to endure more suffering than him.”

Wang Dong: “Who?”

Guo DaLu: “His sister.”

Mei RuNan cast a glance in his direction. There seemed to be a faint smile on her face; a hint of sadness in her expression, yet not quite. Looking at her, there was an indescribable attractiveness about her.

Lin TaiPing gazed at her besottedly. He suddenly asked, “Did you send the coffin here?”

Mei RuNan: “Uh huh.”

Lin TaiPing: “For what reason?”

Mei RuNan took a deep breath before answering. “I knew that after you realized that you had killed someone, your heart would be feeling dreadful. I sent the coffin here for the purpose of letting you know that the person you had ‘killed’ had not died.”

The look on Lin TaiPing's face grew even more smitten as mumbled, "No matter what, I should thank you."

Guo DaLu's eyes travelled between Lin TaiPing and Mei RuNan before he exhaled and affirmed, "You really should thank her. She treats you quite well."

Yan Qi had remained silent during the discussion, but now he spoke in a cold tone, "But NanGong Chou is still the name that was on the coffin."

Mei RuNan: "In spite of what he has done, I still could not betray my older brother." Her eyes grew even redder as she added, "Even though I knew that what he was doing was not right, I could only secretly try to stop him..."

Yan Qi: "And that is why this whole time you did not dare reveal yourself."

Mei RuNan: "I did not dare and also could not reveal myself. But I still tried my best to make it up to you. My only hope was that you would forgive him because of me and everything I had done."

Yan Qi: "Where is he now?"

Mei RuNan: "He has gone home."

Yan Qi: "You were the one who rescued him?"

Mei RuNan: "Of course it was me. He is my older brother by blood. I could not stand to one side and watch him suffer..." All of a sudden, she lifted her chin. "Should you really find that you cannot forgive him, then there is no need for you to seek him out. I am willing to assume responsibility for all of his wrongdoings."

Lin TaiPing jumped to his feet and declared in a loud voice, "Regardless of what anyone else may say, I believe that you have not done anything wrong."

Guo DaLu chimed in, "Whoever says she is wrong is a b*stard! "

Wang Dong: "My only comment is, she cannot be considered a human."

Lin TaiPings face flushed immediately with anger. His neck bulged as he glared fiercely and roared, "Did you just say she is not human?"

Wang Dong sighed, "Yes, she is not human. I have never seen a real person with courage such as hers."

Guo DaLu clapped his hands together. "Absolutely correct. She had no obligation to tell us all these things, but yet, she did not try to hide anything from us. Who else has courage that could compare?"

Yan Qi: "Can you compare?"

Guo DaLu: "If it was me in her place, I am not certain I would be brave enough to tell us all these things directly to our faces."

Yan Qi snickered unexpectedly, "Well at least now you know that women are not as useless as you had thought."

Guo DaLu: "Not only are they not useless, they are approaching greatness."

Her eyes reddened again as Mei RuNan asked hesitantly, "You... you honestly do not blame me?"

Guo DaLu exclaimed, "Blame you? Who would possibly blame you? In fact, we should be on our knees and kowtowing in thanks to you."

Wang Dong: "Were it not for you, even if we could have avoided death by poisoning, we would still have died from starvation."

Mei RuNan's head hung low. "My brother actually is not..."

Guo DaLu hurriedly cut in, "You do not need to explain anything for him. We do not blame him either."

Mei RuNan: "Really?"

Guo DaLu: "If I had been in his shoes, I may have done the same thing."

Wang Dong: "I may have been even more ruthless than him."

Guo DaLu: "I am only worried now that, if your brother finds out that you interfered with what he was doing, he will be furious."

Mei RuNan smiled bitterly. "He knows already."

Guo DaLu reeled back slightly in surprise. "What happened after he found out?"

Mei RuNan: "He was furious."

Guo DaLu: "What did you do?"

Mei RuNan: "I ran away."

Guo DaLu frowned as he pointed out, "But you will have to go back eventually. That is your home."

She lowered her head again and did not answer.

Wang Dong said with a knowing grin, "Of course, if she goes back she will have to suffer some punishment, but she does not have to go back."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong chuckled, "When a girl marries a man, she does not have to go back to her home anymore."

Guo DaLu got the picture. He snorted, "Right. If she is married, she is no longer a member of the Mei family and her brother no longer has control over her."

Wang Dong: "So now, she has no option but to hurry and get married."

Guo DaLu: "Who is she going to marry?"

Wang Dong answered in a nonchalant tone, "Obviously, she will marry the man she likes. Maybe it is you, maybe it's me."

Guo DaLu had all of a sudden become very still from shock. He had discovered that Mei RuNan was smiling secretly. All this time, she had sat quietly with her head hanging low, her cheeks flushed with red, as if she was filled with despair and the whole ordeal was very difficult for her.

But she could not contain a faint smile from showing on the corner of her lips. That smile was similar to one of a young fox who had just stolen eight chicks. The light bulb lit up in Guo DaLu's head. These four macho men had all been duped by her. Under these circumstances, no matter which one she fancied among the four of them, that person would have an obligation to take her as his wife.

The little fox had unsuspectingly ensnared them with a noose around each of their necks. And now, all that was needed was a tug from her hand and one of them would be hung up, captured for the rest of his life.

“It appears that women are much more intelligent than what men had imagined.”

But who was it she wanted to capture?

Wang Dong was still grinning; he was grinning like a fox – a sly old fox. It seemed as if he was certain he would not be the one who was hung. He also appeared to know something that Guo DaLu did not. He let out another chuckle. “We may not be considered as grand heroes or brave paladins, but neither are we ungrateful cowards who will kick our benefactor while she is down. Correct?”

Lin TaiPing: “Correct.”

Wang Dong: “So if Mei guniang has any problems, we will definitely try and help her find a solution, right?”

Lin TaiPing hurriedly affirmed, “Right.” He had again rushed in to be the first to answer.

Guo DaLu let out a sigh and thought to himself as he watched him, “He is still young and can become overly passionate, allowing his emotions to rule at any time. Someone has only gotten the length of rope ready, and he is already scrambling to loop it around his own neck.”

But he had not even completely exhaling that sigh when he noticed that Wang Dong was staring at him and directing a question his way. “And you? Do you think what I said is true?”

“And you? Do you think what I said is true?”

Though Guo DaLu wanted to answer no, he could not since he knew it would look bad if he did. He wished he could grab an egg and shove it into Wang Dong's mouth.

Yan Qi interrupted them, "You do not even need to ask. When it comes to gallantly rising to the occasion and caring for and protecting beauties, who in this world can compare to our Mr. Guo here?"

Wang Dong nodded his head thoughtfully, as if Yan Qi had spoken words that had been in his heart as well. With a serious look on his face, he said, "That statement is very true indeed. But what about you?"

Yan Qi gave a little laugh and replied lightly, "So long as Wang Laoda is okay with it, what problem could I possibly have?"

Wang Dong exhaled a lengthy breath. His face lit up with a bright smile as asked, "Mei guniang, you heard our entire discussion?"

Her head low, Mei RuNan responded with a light nasal "mm" sound. It was as quiet as the cry of a mosquito.

Wang Dong: "Then why will you not tell us about any problem you may have?"

She lowered her head even further. Looking very fragile, she whispered, "I feel awkward saying it out."

Wang Dong: "Don't worry. Tell us."

Her cheeks brushed a pretty pink again, making her appear even more delicate and embarrassed. It took her nearly half a day to finally stammer, "My brother was so livid when he learned what I had done that he nearly went berserk. He

pressed right up against me and demanded to know why I would do something like that, why I would help an outsider harm my own brother.”

Wang Dong: “And how did you answer?”

Mei RuNan blushed even more fiercely. “I could not think of anything else but to say... but to say... but to say...” She kept repeating those three words over and over again, like she had suddenly developed a cramp.

Unable to bear the suspense, Guo DaLu asked anxiously, “What did you say?”

Mei RuNan bit down hard on her lip, as if she had brought herself to make a very difficult decision. Her face scarlet, she carried on, “I said, ‘The person I helped is not an outsider.’ So he asked, ‘If he is not an outsider, what is he?’ I could only answer that he is... is...”

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from blurting out again, “Is what?”

Mei RuNan: “I had no choice but to answer that he is his mei fu [*brother-in-law; younger sister’s husband] because I had already betrothed myself to him.” Upon finishing her sentence, her whole body seemed to go limp and she nearly slid underneath the table.

Guo DaLu nearly fell beneath the table himself.

Wang Dong blinked at her as he inquired, “What did your brother say after he heard this?”

Mei RuNan: “He finally cooled down slightly after I told him. But he warned me that if I was trying to deceive him, he would beat me to death. And he is also forcing me to bring... back home with me.”

Wang Dong: "Bring what back home?"

Mei RuNan: "Bring the person..."

Wang Dong: "Which person?"

Mei RuNan: "Brother-in... brother-in-law..."

Wang Dong: "Whose brother-in-law?"

Mei RuNan: "My... my brother's brother-in-law." She seemed drained once again after forcing the answer out.

Guo DaLu felt himself grow weak also.

Wang Dong let out another long breath, as if Mei RuNan's meaning had only now become apparent. In reality, it truly is no easy feat to be able to completely figure out all the meanings behind a girl's words. He smiled pleasantly, "So it seems that only one question remains."

Lin TaiPing: "Which question is that?"

Wang Dong: "Out of the four of us, who is the brother-in-law of Mei guniang's brother? And will he be willing to go back with Mei guniang?"

Lin TaiPing: "Who would not be willing? Would that person be so heartless as to watch Mei guniang go back and get beaten to death by her older brother?"

Wang Dong: "What if he is unwilling?"

Lin TaiPing: "Then that person should not even be considered our friend. We do not need to be civilized when dealing with friends who are not really friends."

Rubbing his palms together, Wang Dong exclaimed, "True. If someone refuses to go, the other three will force him to. Do you all agree?"

Lin TaiPing: "Agreed."

Wang Dong was staring at Guo DaLu out of the corner of his eye as he addressed him, "What about you?"

Yan Qi spoke up with a chilly tone, "You should not need to ask that question. Do you perceive Mr. Guo to be an ungrateful and disloyal person?"

Wang Dong beamed. "Then it is perfect! All problems have been solved. Mei guniang, what are you waiting for?"

However, Mei RuNan deliberately wanted to keep them waiting a while longer. Women seem to innately enjoy making men anxious. Her eyes were constantly moving, flickering between each of their four faces. Guo DaLu really hoped that her gaze would not end up resting on his face.

He actually did not dislike this "Sour Plum Soup" one bit. This morning, when she had arrived, if she had said that the one she fancied was someone else, not him, he would have been infuriated. But fancying was one thing, taking her as his wife was a different thing.

And being forced to take her as his wife was an entirely different thing. It was analogous to a situation where, though he liked to drink wine, he would not let someone pinch his nose and pour wine down his throat. His only hope now was that there was something wrong with this Sour Plum Soup's eyes, that the man she was attracted to was someone else, not him.

But unfortunately, her eyes appeared to be perfectly fine and in fact, were now fixed upon him. She was not only

gazing directly at him, she was also smiling – a sweet smile, a mesmerizing smile. Everyone who knows that they have hooked a big fish would smile sweetly. Guo DaLu wanted to return her smile, but he could not force one out.

He sighed to himself and mourned, “I guess it is my bad luck that I was born more handsome than everyone else.”

Mei RuNan all of a sudden spoke to him. “I had promised that when I had decided, you would be the first person I told.”

Guo DaLu mumbled, “Really, you do not have to be too concerned about keeping your word with me. I know girls often forget the promises that they make.”

She chimed, “I have not forgotten. Come out with me. I will tell you.” She rose to her feet unexpectedly and walked outside, her footsteps light and graceful like a swallow – a swallow that had just caught seven or eight large caterpillars.

End of Chapter 13

Chapter 14 - A Tough Task

When she reached the door, Mei RuNan turned around and beckoned to Guo DaLu. Her hand was pale and smooth.

Suppose that a pair of hands are wrapped around and gripping your neck. Regardless of how pale these hands are or how soft and smooth, that feeling would still be rather unpleasant.

Guo DaLu had to stand. He looked over at Yan Qi. Yan Qi did not look at him. Guo DaLu turned his eyes toward Wang Dong. Wang Dong was drinking wine, and the cup was blocking his eyes. Guo DaLu cast his gaze over at Lin TaiPing. Lin TaiPing was staring off into the distance. Grinding his teeth together, Guo DaLu grumbled hatefully, "My ancestors must have accumulated many good deeds; otherwise, how could I possibly have made such great friends?"

Mei RuNan's voice was heard calling from outside the door, "What did you say? Why haven't you come outside yet?"

Guo DaLu sighed. "I didn't say anything. I was farting." He finally managed to drag himself out the door. Looking at the agonized expression on his face and the dejected manner in which he hung his head, you would think that he was being escorted to an execution ground.

A long time passed before Lin TaiPing finally exhaled loudly and muttered grumpily, "Never knew that that guy can put up a good act. In his heart, he secretly is delighted, but he still has to pretend and put on that look of misery. It makes you mad just looking at him!" His tone sounded a little sour, as if the wine in his stomach had all turned to vinegar [*i.e jealous].

Wang Dong snickered, "You are mistaken about one thing."

Lin TaiPing: "What is that?"

Wang Dong: "He is not the least bit delighted."

Lin TaiPing: "He's not happy? Is Mei guniang not good enough for him?"

Wang Dong: "Whether she is good enough or not is one matter; whether he is happy or not is a completely different matter."

Lin TaiPing: "How do you know he is not happy?"

Wang Dong: "Because he hasn't turned into an idiot or become mute." Lin TaiPing blinked; he did not understand.

Wang Dong was aware that he was confused so he explained, "There was a brilliant person who once said something that is very sensible.

He said, no matter how smart a man is, if he has truly fallen in love with a girl, he will behave like he is stupid when he is around her, to the point where he cannot even say a word." Perhaps deliberately, perhaps subconsciously, Wang Dong's eyes shifted to glance at Yan Qi as he chuckled, "But in front of Mei guniang, he seems to have more to say than anyone else..."

Yan Qi cut him off with an icy tone. "That is only because some people were born as blabbermouths."

Wang Dong responded with a little laugh and did not continue speaking. Nobody likes being a blabbermouth. Usually, no one would ever call Wang Dong a blabbermouth, but today there seemed to be something different about him. The number of words he had spoken was at least

several times more than what would normally be heard coming from him.

Lin TaiPing also thought something seemed strange. "Why is this person all of a sudden so talkative today? And who were those words intended for?" Lin TaiPing only was certain about one thing: unless he had a deliberate purpose, Wang Dong was usually too lazy to even bother moving his lips.

The moonlight was beautiful. Perhaps very few people have noticed, but winter moonlight is not necessarily less captivating than spring. The winter moon is also able to move the heart of a young girl.

The round moon hung above the treetop. Mei RuNan was standing beneath that tree. The moonlight shone upon her face, her eyes. Her eyes were even more beautiful than the moon. Even Guo DaLu had to admit that she really was an attractive girl, especially her figure.

Guo DaLu had practically never seen another girl whose figure was as good as hers. She seemed to be even prettier than the first time Guo DaLu saw her. Perhaps it was because of her clothing, or perhaps it was her smile. Today she was no longer wearing clothes made of rough cloth. The narrow waistline and long skirt accentuated her dainty waist and made her graceful bearing even more mesmerizing.

She was looking at Guo DaLu once again with a little smile. Her smile was especially sweet. Normally, Guo DaLu was particularly fond of her smile, but now, he did not even dare look at it. A girl's smile is like her clothes and jewellery, her rouge and powder - these are all bait used to entice a man onto her hook. A smart man should not even look. If that day

Guo DaLu had understood this principle, he would not have brought about today's predicament.

He gave a silent sigh as he walked over at a snail's pace. Out of nowhere, he asked, "Is your brother's alcohol capacity really that good?"

She giggled, "No. He rarely drinks."

Smiling bitterly, he moaned, "Then this is an even bigger problem."

Mei RuNan: "What problem is this?"

Guo DaLu answered with a chuckle, "I had been planning that, once I saw him, I would find some way to get him drunk to prevent him from remembering the events of the other day and trying to get revenge."

Mei RuNan smiled prettily. "If you are afraid of him, why don't you avoid him for a while? After a few days have passed and his anger has died down, you can go see him."

Guo DaLu: "But aren't you in a hurry to bring me back to see him?"

Mei RuNan's eyes grew wide in realization and she gaped at him with amazement. "You thought... you thought..." She suddenly doubled over in laughter.

Guo DaLu was silent for a moment. His eyes bulged out as he gawked back at her and spluttered, "It's not me..."

Mei RuNan was howling so hard that she could not answer and could only shake her head non-stop

Guo DaLu could not help demanding, "If it's not me, then who is it?"

After much effort, she finally managed to control of her laughter. She gasped, "It's Yan Qi."

Guo DaLu yowled, "Yan Qi?... The guy you have your eye on is Yan Qi?"

She nodded.

This time, Guo DaLu had to stop and let it sink in. He actually had no desire to marry Mei RuNan; in fact, he did not want to marry anybody. He should have been delighted and breathing a sigh of relief that the man she fancied was not him.

But for some reason, he was feeling miserable and very disappointed, even a little sour. A long while passed before he was finally able to exhale out that breath of jealousy. Shaking his head, he mumbled, "I just don't understand. How could you be attracted to him?"

She smiled. "I think he is great. Everything about him is great."

Guo DaLu: "Is it also great that he does not bathe?"

Mei RuNan: "A man with personality usually does not care about his appearance before he gets married, but once he has a wife to care for him, he will change." Her eyes glimmered as if she was lost in her reverie.

A dreamy smile crossed her face. "To be honest, ever since I was young, I have always liked the type of man that does not confine himself to following trivial rituals. That is what I would call true manliness. I want to throw up when I see guys that spend the whole day sprucing themselves up so that their hair is all greasy and their face is powdered."

Guo DaLu was looking into her eyes. He suddenly realized that her eyes were not the least bit beautiful. They were like the eyes of a blind person.

Mei RuNan: "I know that he has been avoiding me as if he really dislikes me. Only men with character are like that. I detest those types of men who, when they see a woman, behave like flies around blood."

Guo DaLu's face seemed to grow a little hot. He gave a couple of dry coughs and asked, "So it seems as if you really do like him?"

Mei RuNan: "You really could not tell, not even a little bit?"

Guo DaLu let out a sigh. Smiling bitterly, he said, "All I could sense was that you were being particularly affectionate with me."

She answered sweetly, "That is only because I was deliberately trying to make him mad."

Guo DaLu: "Why would you want to make him mad if you like him?"

Mei RuNan: "It's because I like him, that is why I want to make him mad. Don't you understand that principle?"

He laughed cynically and replied, "If that is the case, it is best for a man if no woman ever takes a liking to him. That way, he will end up living a happier life."

Blinking her eyes innocently, she inquired, "Are you very happy right now?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course I'm happy. I am extremely happy."

When Guo DaLu walked back inside, even a blind man could tell that he was not the least bit happy. If it could be said that he looked like a prisoner being taken to his execution place when he went out, then now he basically looked like a dead person, or at most, someone who had one more breath of air than a dead person.

A breath of bitter air.

The situation inside the house was nearly identical to what it had been when he left. Wang Dong was drinking wine, Lin TaiPing was staring off into the distance, and Yan Qi was purposefully trying to pretend as if he did not see him.

Guo DaLu grabbed the cup out of Wang Dong's hand and cried, "What is wrong with you today? Have you turned into a wine pitcher?"

Wang Dong chuckled pleasantly, "Of course. I should be drinking more than just a few cups of my good friend's wedding wine. You're not willing to part with your wine?"

Guo DaLu wanted to give a little laugh also, but nothing would come out. He glanced at Yan Qi from the corner of his eye. "There is a groom in this room, but it's not me."

Wang Dong did not seem to be surprised with this as he asked indifferently, "If it is not you, then who is it?"

Guo DaLu did not answer. He turned around and with wide eyes, stared at Yan Qi, who could not help breaking his silence as he demanded, "What are you looking at?"

Guo DaLu: "You."

Yan Qi gave an icy little laugh. "What is there to look at? I think you are staring at the wrong person."

Exhaling a sigh, Guo DaLu said, "I am trying to find out right now what is there about you that is so nice to look at. Why would someone fancy you?"

Yan Qi's brow furrowed into a frown. "Who fancies me?"

Guo DaLu: "The bride."

Yan Qi was starting to feel a little alarmed. He gasped, "What does the bride have to do with me?"

Guo DaLu was finally able to laugh. "If the bride has nothing to do with the groom, then who else could she have anything to do with?"

Yan Qi's eyes widened as he cried, "Who is the groom?"

Guo DaLu: "You."

Yan Qi froze. At first, it was obvious that he was in shock, but then, he suddenly became so delighted he could not contain his pleasure and giggled out loud. The expression on his face was like a large ingot had unexpectedly fallen at his feet.

Guo DaLu blinked, then remarked, "So it turns out you like her as well."

Yan Qi did not say anything but only continued to laugh.

Guo DaLu: "If you do not like her, why are laughing with such glee?"

Yan Qi did not answer; instead, he asked, "Where is she now?"

In a dull tone, Guo DaLu responded, "In the courtyard waiting for her groom. It is best if you don't make her wait until she is anxious."

Yan Qi did not make her wait. Before Guo DaLu had finished, he had already bounded to his feet and rushed outside. As Guo DaLu watched him run off, he shook his head and muttered, "It looks like the groom is even more anxious than the bride."

"It looks like the groom is even more anxious than the bride."

Wang Dong all of a sudden snickered, "You do not want to admit defeat?"

Guo DaLu glared at him before replying with a cold laugh, "I just think there is something odd."

Wang Dong: "What's odd?"

Guo DaLu: "I just think it is odd that every woman's eyes seem to have some sort of problem."

Wang Dong: "You are wondering how this girl could possibly like Yan Qi? You think he is ugly?"

Guo DaLu pondered over this for a moment. "You cannot say that he is really ugly. At least, his eyes are not ugly."

Actually, not only were Yan Qi's eyes not ugly, they were very striking. In particular, when they held the glimmer of a smile, they looked like the clear waters of a lake shimmering under the spring breeze.

Wang Dong: "His nose is really ugly?"

Guo DaLu again thought over it before answering, "No, not really, but it looks like a meat bun when he smiles." When Yan Qi smiled, his nose would always first crinkle up slightly, but not only did it not look like it meat bun, it actually made it seem very attractive.

Wang Dong: "His lips are ugly?"

With a surprising laugh, Guo DaLu said, "I rarely look at his lips."

Wang Dong: "Why?"

Guo DaLu giggled, "Because his mouth is even smaller than Golden-Coat Pekingese's."

Wang Dong: "Having a petite mouth is a bad thing?"

Guo DaLu had to shake his head because he was not one to speak contrary to his conscience.

Wang Dong: "Then what is it about him that is physically unattractive?"

Guo DaLu mulled over the question for a long time before suddenly realizing that Yan Qi, from his head to his toe, was actually very good looking. Even his filthy pair of hands seemed more elegant than other people's. Sighing, Guo DaLu admitted, "If he bathed more frequently, perhaps he actually would not be unattractive."

Wang Dong laughed, "If he actually did take a bath, you may be in for a surprise."

Guo DaLu also gave a little chuckle. "I really do hope, then, that he will surprise me one time."

Wang Dong: "So if you think that he is not so bad, then what is wrong with Mei guniang taking a liking to him?"

Guo DaLu sighed, "Nothing. Nothing at all."

A piercing cry was suddenly heard coming from the courtyard. It was Mei RuNan screaming, and she sounded

like a cat that had just had its tail stepped on. Guo DaLu stood up as if he wanted to go outside to take a look, but he sat back down again. Smiling, he shook his head and said, “I know that grooms are all very anxious, but I did not think that Yan Qi would be so terribly eager.”

He had just finished his sentence when Yan Qi walked in. He walked in alone.

Guo DaLu: “Where is the bride?”

Yan Qi: “There is no bride.”

Guo DaLu: “If there is a groom, then there’s a bride.”

Yan Qi: “There’s no groom as well.”

Guo DaLu looked intently at him, then snorted, “Did the bride get frightened away by the groom?” All of a sudden, he noticed that there were three long fingernail marks on Yan Qi’s face, like he had been scratched by a cat.

All of a sudden, he noticed that there were three long fingernail marks on Yan Qi’s face, like he had been scratched by a cat.

Yan Qi, though, did not seem to mind and, rather, seemed to be very cheerful as he blinked and replied with a smile on his face, “Yes, she has left but not because I frightened her off.”

Guo DaLu: “No? If you had not started putting the moves on her, why would she scream?”

Yan Qi laughed, “If I really had tried to put the moves on her, do you think she would have run off?”

Guo DaLu admitted, “No.” This was because he knew that, if a girl really did like a man, she would not be scared if he did put the moves on her. “But then, why did she leave?”

Yan Qi: “Because she suddenly changed her mind and does not want to marry me.”

Startled, Guo DaLu inquired, “She changed her mind? How could that be?”

Yan Qi: “Because... because I said one thing to her.”

Guo DaLu shook his head. “I don’t believe you. If a woman is intent on marrying you, even if you say 3,600 sentences to her, she still will not change her mind.” He gave a little chuckle and continued, “When have you ever seen someone willing to let a fish that has already been hooked escape?”

Smiling, Yan Qi offered, “Maybe she discovered that this fish has too many spikes, or maybe she just does not like to eat fish.”

Guo DaLu: “There is no cat in this world that does not like to eat fish.”

Yan Qi: “She is not a cat.”

Looking at his face, Guo DaLu smirked, “If she is not a cat, then why would she scratch people?” Obviously, Guo DaLu knew that women know how to scratch, and when they do, it is often more ferocious than a cat. Cats will scratch people for a reason; that is not always the case with women. If a woman just feels like scratching you, she will.

There was only one thing Guo DaLu could not figure out. “What scheme did you use that made her change her mind?”

Yan Qi: "I didn't use any scheme. I just said one sentence."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of sentence?"

Yan Qi huffed, "That is my business. Why must you insist on asking?"

Guo DaLu: "Because I want to learn how to do it, too."

Yan Qi: "Why do you want to learn?"

Guo DaLu chortled, "What man wouldn't want to learn it?"

Yan Qi: "Then for sure I cannot tell you."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi gave a little chuckle. "Because that is my little secret. If I teach it to you, then what would happen to my advantage?"

Exhaling a long breath, Guo DaLu mumbled, "And I thought we were friends. Who knew that even this..."

Out of nowhere, Wang Dong cut him off. "Can friends not have secrets?"

Guo DaLu: "It depends on what type of secret."

Wang Dong: "A secret is a secret. All secrets are the same."

Guo DaLu asked curiously, "So it sounds like you have a secret also?"

Wang Dong nodded his head. "And you? Do you not have any?"

After considering it for a moment, Guo DaLu finally forced himself to give a curt nod.

Wang Dong: “And if someone was to ask you about your secret, would you tell them?”

Guo DaLu again thought over his question and finally forced himself to shake his head in reply.

Wang Dong: “Then you should not be asking others either.”
He lay down.

When he lay down, it meant that the conversation had ended. Only a correct conclusion can end a conversation. Wang Dong’s conclusions were usually correct.

Everyone has a secret. Everyone has the right to preserve their secret. That is their personal freedom.

End of Chapter 14

Chapter 15 - Guo DaLu's Secret

What is a secret? A secret is something where you are the lone person who can bask in it. It may fill you with joy, it may bring you pain. No matter what it is, though, it belongs solely to you. If what it brings is pain, then you must endure it alone; if it brings joy, you also cannot share it with others, even your best of friends. That is because, should a second person know your secret, then it can no longer be called a secret.

Some secrets really are a type of enjoyment. When you have just finished eating a good meal, taken a nice hot bath, slipped on some old, baggy clothes, and are sitting alone in a comfortable chair in front of a window beyond which the sky is filled with the colors of the setting sun, you will suddenly think about your secret. Then you will not be able to control the warm feeling that will rise up within your heart...

Guo DaLu had been seated beneath the eaves for a long time. As long as there was still something that he could be doing, he would not be sitting there. There are some people who would rather stroll around without a purpose, watching others come and go along the street, watching dogs fight in the corner, than be locked up in a house. Guo DaLu was such a person. But now, the only thing he could do was sit there staring blankly at nothing.

Icicles, some long, some short, had formed and were hanging from the eaves, but no one knew how many there were. Except Guo DaLu. There were a total of sixty-three icicles of which twenty-six of them were relatively longer

and thirty-seven were relatively shorter. That is because he had already counted seventeen times.

It was just too cold today. Not only could no one be found on the streets, even the dogs had holed themselves up into some hidden place. He had lived for more than twenty years and had gone through more than twenty winters, but he could not recall a day colder than this day. When someone is having a run of ill fortune, it seems like even the weather is deliberately trying to go up against him. He frequently had bad luck, but he never before had been this unlucky.

Bad luck is like an infectious disease: if one person has it, others who are with him will certainly not run into any good fortune as well. Therefore, he was not sitting alone. Yan Qi, Wang Dong, and Lin TaiPing were also seated there with him and were also staring off into space.

Out of the blue, Lin TaiPing asked, "Can you guys guess how many icicles there are?"

Yan Qi: "Sixty-three."

Wang Dong: "Twenty-six long ones, thirty-seven short ones."

Guo DaLu burst out in giggles. "I see you guys have counted too."

Yan Qi: "I've counted four times already."

Wang Dong: "I have only counted three times because I don't want to do it too many times."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "I want to leave myself the opportunity to count a few more times."

Guo DaLu wanted to laugh, but somehow, he could not make himself. This answer was hilarious, yet at the same time, pitiful.

All of a sudden, he rose to his feet, turned around, and rested his gaze on the table in the centre of the house – the padauk table, mounted with an entire slab of marble as its surface. “I wonder if I still have strength to bring this table to uncle’s shop,” he mumbled to himself.

Wang Dong: “You don’t.”

Guo DaLu blinked at him. “Should I try?”

Wang Dong: “That’s unnecessary.”

Guo DaLu: “Why?”

Wang Dong: “I know that you certainly can lift up a table that has nothing on it, but if there is a very heavy thing weighing down on that table, that is a different story.”

Guo DaLu: “But there is nothing weighing down this table.”

Wang Dong: “Yes there is.”

Guo DaLu: “What?”

Wang Dong: “Face! And not just my face, but all of ours.” In an emotionless tone, he continued, “We have not only accepted someone’s rent, we also have received a storage fee. If we now go and pawn her belongings, what remnants of face will we have for the future?”

With a long sigh and a self-mocking smile, Guo DaLu agreed, “You are right. I truly cannot carry this table.”

Wang Dong: “The most important thing in this world is face. That’s why only one kind of person could ever pick up this

table.”

Guo DaLu inquired curiously, “What kind?”

Wang Dong: “Someone who has no shame.”

Lin TaiPing heaved a sigh. “That kind of person usually is able to eat until he is full.”

Yan Qi: “Pigs usually eat until they are full too.”

Lin TaiPing chuckled, “If a person wants to preserve his face, then there are times that he will have to neglect his stomach. No matter what, face is much important than your belly.”

Yan Qi: “That is because people are not pigs. Only a pig would think that his belly is more important.”

Lin TaiPing: “Hence, some people would rather die of starvation than do things that would cause them to lose face.”

Wang Dong: “But we have not starved to death yet, right?”

Lin TaiPing: “Right.”

Wang Dong: “It may be several days since we have eaten until our bellies are full, but at least we have lasted this long.”

Guo DaLu thrust out his chest and boasted, “No one can deny that our bones are hardier than most people.”

Wang Dong: “As long as we are willing to persist, there will be one day when things turn for the better.”

Guo DaLu’s face brightened. “True. Winter has already arrived, so spring cannot be far, right?”

Wang Dong: "So long as we can endure until that day comes, we will still be able to hold our heads up proudly because we will not have wronged anyone, nor will we have wronged ourselves."

Still uncertain, Lin TaiPing could not help asking, "Will we be able to last until that day?"

Guo DaLu jumped in to answer first. "Of course we can." He walked over and put his arm around Lin TaiPing. "Because even though we may own nothing, at the very least, we have still have friendship."

Warmth flooded Lin TaiPing's heart as he looked over at Guo DaLu. He suddenly realized that he had enough courage. Regardless of how difficult the hardship was, how cold the weather was, he did not care. All of a sudden, he ran outside.

It was not until night that he returned, and in his hand he held a paper bag. Raising it up, he exclaimed with a grin, "Guess! What do you think I have brought back with me?"

Guo DaLu blinked. "Could it be mantou [*steamed buns]?"

Lin TaiPing laughed, "Correct answer."

Inside that paper bag, there really were mantou. Four big mantou. And sandwiched within each mantou was actually a large chunk of meat. Guo DaLu whooped in delight, "Long live Lin TaiPing!" Grabbing a mantou, he proclaimed, "I am in awe of you. Right now, even if you said you would kill me, I still would not be able to conjure up even half a mantou."

Yan Qi's eyes were fixed intently on Lin TaiPing. "Of course, these mantou were not conjured up out of nowhere?"

With a little smile, Lin TaiPing answered casually, “Maybe they fell from the sky.” He handed one to Wang Dong.

Wang Dong shook his head. “I’m not going to eat.”

Lin TaiPing: “Why?”

Wang Dong sighed, “Because I cannot bear to eat your clothes.”

Guo DaLu, who had just taken a bite out of his mantou, froze. Only now did he discover that Lin TaiPing was missing an article of clothing – his thickest piece of clothing. Lin TaiPing did not have much clothes to begin with. By now, he was so cold his lips had been drained of all color, but yet, a joyful smile could be seen at the corner of those lips. “You are right. I did pawn my clothing in exchange for four mantou because I am famished. When a person is very hungry, no one can blame him for taking his own clothes to pawn.”

Wang Dong: “Then you should have finished eating before coming back. That way, we...”

Lin TaiPing cut him off. “The reason I did not hide and eat alone in secret is because I am selfish.”

Wang Dong: “Selfish?”

Lin TaiPing: “Because I thought that four people eating together would be much happier than me hiding away eating all alone.”

This is a true friend: he is willing to share his good fortunes, and he will also bear your hardships with you. When one has such a friend, why should a little poverty or cold weather matter?

Guo DaLu was chewing slowly on his mantou. He suddenly beamed and said, "To be honest, I have never eaten something so delicious in my entire life."

Lin TaiPing chuckled as he protested, "You are not being honest. It's just a cold mantou."

Guo DaLu: "It may only be a cold mantou, but even if someone offered to swap it with all the fish and meat in the world, I still would not give it up."

Lin TaiPing's eyes seemed to grow red. Grasping Guo DaLu's hand tightly, he said, "After hearing that, this mantou suddenly seems a lot tastier."

Some words are like a type of magical spell: they can not only turn a cold mantou into a delicacy and make a winter day balmy, they can also transform a dry and uninteresting life into one of color and diversity. If you would like to learn how to say words like this, then you first must learn how to be genuine with your friends.

Guo DaLu exhaled a sigh. "It is a shame that my clothes are too worn out."

Lin TaiPing: "Worn out clothes are not something to be ashamed of."

Guo DaLu: "Unfortunately, HuoBoPi will not think that way, otherwise..."

Yan Qi giggled, "Otherwise you would have taken them off long ago and pawned them in exchange for wine, correct?"

Smiling cynically, Guo DaLu replied, "Correct answer." Yan Qi rose unexpectedly to his feet. Guo DaLu called after him, "Don't bother trying. Your clothes are in even worse shape than mine."

Yan Qi ignored him. He was out the door swiftly but very quickly returned. When he came back, he was holding a pot of water. “ ‘On a chilly night, when a guest arrives, tea can serve as wine.’ If tea can be a substitute for wine, why can’t water?”

A chuckle escaped from Guo DaLu. “I never knew you were so cultured.”

With a grin, Yan Qi joked, “When one is extremely poor, one has no choice but to be cultured.”

This was how they approached life. In times that they had wine, they would guzzle more than anyone; but in times when they had no wine, they would drink water in the same way. They were happy when they drank their wine, but they were equally happy when they were drinking water. That is why the life they lived was more joyful than other people's.

However, there is one difference between drinking wine and drinking water: the more wine you swallow, the warmer you feel, but the more water you ingest, the colder you get, especially when drinking cold water in such weather.

Guo DaLu suddenly stood up and started doing handsprings. Laughing, Yan Qi asked, “What are you doing?”

Guo DaLu: “I am experienced. Your body warms up after you move around a bit. Why don’t you guys do the same?”

Yan Qi shook his head. “Because I have experience also. The faster you move, the quicker you get hungry.”

Guo DaLu responded with a laugh. “You think too much. As long as you do not feel cold, why should you bother...” He did not finish what he was going to say because he suddenly noticed an object tumbling in front of his face.

The gold had not dropped from the sky; it had fallen from Guo DaLu from somewhere around his chest. He had been doing his sixth handspring, his feet pointing towards the sky and his head hanging upside down, when the gold had fallen out from his clothes. “Dong.” It landed in front of him.

The fact that it made a “dong” sound when it hit the floor meant that the gold was rather heavy. It was a necklace with a thick chain, and there was even a gold pendant in the shape of a chicken heart also. The pendant was at least double the size of a real chicken’s heart.

It was an unbelievable phenomenon that such a large amount of gold could possibly drop from a person who was so poor that he had not eaten for several days. But Wang Dong and the others had to believe it because the three of them had very clearly watched it happen.

They wished that they had not seen anything. They truly did not want to believe that this was real. Lin TaiPing had even taken his clothes to pawn, and yet Guo DaLu was still hiding such a thick gold necklace. How could someone actually have in his possession a gold necklace but yet, still put on an act in front of his friends pretending that he was poor? And such a convincing act. What type of friend was this? They really were not willing to believe that Guo DaLu was such a friend.

Wang Dong suddenly let out a loud yawn and muttered, “Why does a person always feel like sleeping after he has eaten his fill?” He went off to go sleep, and on the way strolled right in front of Guo DaLu, as if he neither saw the necklace or Guo DaLu himself.

Lin TaiPing also yawned and then, to no one in particular, said, “On such a cold day, what better place could there be

than inside your blankets?" He too went to go sleep, as if he had not seen anything either.

Only Yan Qi remained sitting there, staring off into space.

A long time passed before Guo DaLu gradually lowered his legs back to the ground and slowly stood himself upright. It seemed as if it was difficult for him to stand straight again.

No stars, no moon, just light from a single lamp. A very small light because there was not much lamp oil left.

But the gold necklace still sparkled dazzlingly under that lamplight.

Guo DaLu lowered his head to look at the necklace and mumbled, "Strange. Why is it that gold always looks shiny, no matter how dark a place it is in?"

Yan Qi remarked in a dull tone, "Maybe that is the positive aspect about gold. Why else would so many people regard it as being even more important than their friends?"

Guo DaLu was silent for a long while. All of a sudden, he lifted his head. "Why haven't you gone off to sleep?"

Yan Qi: "I am waiting."

Guo DaLu: "Waiting for what?"

Yan Qi: "Waiting for you to tell..."

Guo DaLu announced in a loud voice, "I have nothing to say. If all of you want to view me as that type of person, then I am that type of person."

Yan Qi gazed steadily at him before, after a very very long time, he finally rose to his feet and slowly walked out the door.

Guo DaLu never looked at him.

Outside, the wind was cold and blowing fiercely.

The lamplight was dim. Out of nowhere, a chilly gust of wind blew in and extinguished the light.

But the gold necklace still shone.

Guo DaLu's head hung low. He stared at that necklace. It was uncertain how much time had passed before he bent slowly at the waist, picked up the necklace, and held it up on his open palm.

His tears started gushing out, flowing like a fountain, as drop after drop fell onto his palm. The necklace, cold as ice; the tears, hot as flames. He suddenly fell to his knees and, at long last, allowed himself to weep, all the while trying his hardest to suppress the sound of his sobbing. He did not want anyone to hear him cry. This was his secret and also his greatest pain. He was not willing for anybody to know this secret, nor did he wish for any person to share the burden of his pain.

And so, no one understood how deep his agony was, how profound. Though this had happened a very long time ago, even now, when he thought about it, his heart would shatter. He knew he would have to bear the pain for the rest of his life; even death would not free him from it.

The incident that just happened had pained him also. He would rather die than lose this group of friends. But he did not try to explain because he knew that they would not forgive him. He could not even find a way to forgive himself. Perhaps there is a true type of pain in this world: it is those pains that you cannot tell other people about.

“Cannot say it... How can I say it?”

“How can I still have the nerve to stay here?”

The wind outside was even fiercer, even colder.

He gritted his teeth, quietly wiped away his tears, and stood. No matter how cold and callous the world outside was, he was prepared to endure it alone. He had done something wrong, and he was willing to accept responsibility. He would not explain, nor would he ask for pardon – even from his friends.

But Heaven knew that he valued his friends even more than his own life.

“Friends, farewell. There will be a day when you understand me. When that day comes, we will still be friends, but right now...” His tears started to fall again. It was when he was reaching his hand up to brush them away that he saw Yan Qi. Not only Yan Qi, but Wang Dong and Lin TaiPing as well. He did not know when they had come back into the room, standing there quietly, watching him wordlessly. He could not see the expression on their faces, only three glimmering pairs of eyes. He wished they could not see his face either or the tears on his face.

He coughed lightly a few times. “Weren’t you guys asleep already?”

Lin TaiPing: “We couldn’t sleep.”

Forcing a faint smile on to his face, Guo DaLu remarked, “Even if you cannot sleep, you should lie in your blankets. On a day like this, is there another place in the world better than being under your covers?”

Wang Dong: “There is.”

Yan Qi: "Right here is better than the blankets."

Guo DaLu: "What is there that is good about this place?"

Wang Dong: "Only one thing."

Yan Qi: "This place has friends, blankets don't."

Guo DaLu suddenly felt a warmth rushing up from his heart that seemed to clog up his throat. A long time passed before he could speak. His head hanging low, he uttered, "There is no friend here. I do not deserve to be your friend."

Wang Dong: "Who said?"

Yan Qi: "I didn't say it."

Wang Dong: "We came here for the sole purpose of saying one thing."

Guo DaLu clenched his hands into two fists. "Say... say it."

Wang Dong: "We understand you, and we trust you. That's why, no matter what may happen, you are still our friend."

This is what it means to be a friend.

They can partake in your joy and they can share in your pain. If you have hardships, they are willing to help. If you are in danger, they will step forward and face it for you. Even if you truly have done something wrong, they are willing to be understanding. In front of friends like these, what secrets could you possibly have that cannot be shared?

The wind outside was still cold, still fierce.

Inside, the house was still dim.

But at this time, this moment, the only thing they could sense was warmth and brightness because they knew that they had friends, true and sincere friends.

Where there are friends, there is warmth and light.

“No matter what may happen, you are still our friend.”

Guo DaLu's blood was roiling. Normally he would have rather died than cry in front of other people, but now, his tears were flowing again. No one could ever make him do it – except for his friends. He finally told his secret.

He finally told his secret.

Guo DaLu's hometown had many pretty girls. The most beautiful girl was named Zhu Zhu.

He fell in love with Zhu Zhu; she loved him as well. He cared for her with all his heart and mind. He told her that he was willing to offer his life and everything he had to her. He was not like other men, who merely said the words. He really did do what he said. Zhu Zhu was very poor. By the time Guo DaLu's parents had passed away, though, she was no longer poor because he knew that she belonged to him. She herself had said that her entire being belonged to him. He was willing to do anything for her trust, her happiness.

But then, he discovered something.

Zhu Zhu did not love him. Just like many other women, her words were merely lip service. She had promised to marry him. Besides him, she would marry no other man. They had even decided on a wedding date. However, on the day

before their wedding, she got married first – to someone else. She betrayed everything that Guo DaLu had given her and eloped with that man.

The gold necklace was what she had given to Guo DaLu as her promise gift of love. It was also the only thing that she had ever given to him.

Nobody said anything. No one knew what to say. In the end, it was Guo DaLu himself who broke the silence. He suddenly sniggered, “You will never guess who she ran off with.”

Lin TaiPing: “Who?”

Guo DaLu: “My stableman.” He laughed loudly. “I had always treated her like she was the most exalted person in this world and basically viewed her like she was a fairy from heaven, but she instead decides to elope with my stableman, the one I most looked down upon. What do you say: is that hilarious or not?”

Not.

Nobody found the situation funny at all. Only Guo DaLu alone was laughing incessantly because he was afraid that if he stopped laughing, he would weep. His laughter continued without ceasing for a long time until he unexpectedly commented, “This incident did teach me a good lesson.”

Lin TaiPing: “What lesson is that?” He had not really wanted to ask, but he had felt that Guo DaLu should not be the only one speaking, that he should demonstrate how much he cared.

Guo DaLu: “The lesson is that men absolutely should not show excessive deference to a woman. If you respect her too much, she will think that you are a fool, that you are not even worth a penny.”

Yan Qi suddenly objected, "You are wrong."

Guo DaLu: "Who says?"

Yan Qi: "The reason why she did that was not because you respected her. If a woman can do such a deed, there is only one reason why."

Guo DaLu: "What reason?"

Yan Qi: "It is because she is naturally an evil woman."

Guo DaLu was silent for a long time. He finally nodded slowly and with a mocking smile, responded, "That is why I do not blame her. I only blame myself for making a wrong assessment of a person."

Wang Dong piped up, "That type of thought is wrong also."

Guo DaLu: "Wrong?"

Wang Dong: "You have been agonizing about this because the whole time, you have always allowed your thoughts to take the worst possible course. You keep thinking that she deceived you and that you were dumped."

Guo DaLu: "What else could it be?"

Wang Dong: "At least you should think in a different direction."

Guo DaLu: "How should I be thinking?"

Wang Dong: "On the positive side."

Guo DaLu gave a cynical laugh. "I cannot think of any."

Wang Dong: "Did you ever see, with your own eyes, her do anything with your stableman?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Wang Dong: "Then how can you conclude that she eloped with him?"

Pausing a moment in surprise, Guo DaLu stuttered, "I... I'm not the only person who presumed that. Everyone believed the same."

Wang Dong: "If someone else believes something, you are just going to believe it too? If someone thinks that you should eat cr*p, would you do it?"

Guo DaLu was speechless.

Wang Dong: "Everyone has their own prejudices. Those people do not even understand her; how could their opinion of her be accurate? Furthermore, even good friends at times can have misunderstandings." He gave a little chuckle before carrying on, "For example, we could have misunderstood you and thought that you are miserly and a terrible friend."

Guo DaLu protested, "But she and the stableman undeniably disappeared suddenly on the same day."

Wang Dong: "That may only have been a coincidence."

Guo DaLu: "How can such perfect coincidences exist in this world?"

Wang Dong: "They can. Not only do they exist, they are common."

Guo DaLu: "Well then, why did they suddenly leave?"

Wang Dong: "Perhaps the stableman thought that his job had no future and decided to go somewhere else to find something more promising."

Guo DaLu: "And Zhu Zhu? What reason could she have to leave? I even had a bridal sedan chair ready for her."

Wang Dong: "Why couldn't there be a different reason? That night, maybe a sudden change occurred that you did not know about, forcing her to have no choice but to leave. Or maybe she left involuntarily; someone had kidnapped her away."

Lin TaiPing jumped in and offered, "Perhaps this whole time, she had wanted to explain to you but she never had the chance."

Exhaling a sigh, Yan Qi said, "Possibly one of the most painful things in this world is to know that someone has misunderstood you and that you have been wronged, yet you cannot explain yourself."

Lin TaiPing: "Even more agonizing is when nobody will give you a chance to explain."

Wang Dong: "The greatest pain is when you cannot explain some things. For example..."

Guo DaLu sighed, "For example, the incident just now: I had not wanted to explain anything. If I had already left when you guys arrived here, then you possibly may have continued to misunderstand me."

Wang Dong: "Correct. Have you straightened out your thinking now?" Guo DaLu nodded. Wang Dong explained, "A scenario often has many aspects to it. You must be willing to look at the positive side of things in order for you to live a happy life."

Yan Qi added, "It is unfortunate, though, that some people are not willing and instead, they think from only the negative perspective and back themselves into a dead end."

Wang Dong: "That type of person is not only stupid, but he also brings suffering onto himself; he abuses himself. I would think that you are not that type of person, right?"

With a laugh, Guo DaLu announced, "Whoever says I am will have his nose knocked flat by me."

So, if you have a secret within your heart and it is tormenting you, it is best if you can tell it to a friend because true friends will not only share in your joys, they will also bear your sufferings with you.

Guo DaLu suddenly felt a lot better, a lot happier. That was because he no longer had a secret, because he could see the bright side of the situation. In the deep of the night, when it was time for dreams to return, even if this ordeal came into thoughts, he would not feel sorrowed anymore. At most, there might have been a hint of melancholy, but sometimes, your melancholies can be an enjoyment as well.

"The two of you may have gone separate ways, but maybe as a result, you are living happier lives."

"Maybe she has found a good husband. As for you... if that incident had not occurred, perhaps by now, each day you would have been holding children, changing diapers, and maybe even getting in fights over wood, rice, oil, and salt [*i.e. meeting the basics of life]."

"In the future, you can mutually reminisce about one another and cherish the memories of the sweet moments in

your past and each other's good aspects. And later, should you happen to come across one another again, you will feel glad."

"Even if you never see each other again, it doesn't matter because at least you have a collection of tender memories. When you are sitting by the fire, you will have something to think about that will warm your heart."

"Everyone has his own fate. You cannot force things, nor should you force them."

"That is why there really is nothing for you to feel pained about."

All of these were Wang Dong, Yan Qi, and Lin TaiPing's final conclusion for this incident.

From then on, no one ever brought up the incident again, nor did they mention the gold necklace. They knew how Guo DaLu felt and understood the necklace's worth in his heart. There are some things that people can never put a value on.

Wang Dong, as usual, was lying on the bed, when he suddenly heard Guo DaLu cry from outside, "Uncle is here!"

Guo DaLu did not have an uncle. "Uncle" referred to the pawnshop owner, "HuoBoPi." [*Recall, the nickname HuoBoPi literally means to skin (his customers) alive; "huo" = live; "bopi" = flay] HuoBoPi obviously was not surnamed Huo. He actually was not too cutthroat either. At most, he would try and scrape a little extra profit off of you. Naturally, he would scrape you quite thoroughly.

Strangely, though, the more a person tries to scrape profits off of other people, the skinnier he often is. He looked like a wild rabbit that had been hung out to dry. His back was always hunched and his eyes were constantly squinting.

Whenever he spoke, he would look at you from the corner of his eye, as if he was at all times appraising the value of the goods that you had on you.

Even though Wang Dong and the others would frequently visit him, this was the first time he had been to their place. That was why Wang Dong forced himself to get out of his bed.

Given the type of person that HuoBoPi was, if he was willing to hike for half a shi chen up the mountain to “visit” someone, there usually was only one reason for this. That reason was not too different from the reason a weasel would go to visit a chicken.

When Wang Dong walked into the guest hall, Guo DaLu was smiling and in the middle of asking HuoBoPi, “Which gust of wind blew you over here? Could it be that you came to purchase this house of Wang Dong’s?” He knew that Wang Dong had tried more than twenty different schemes to try and sell the house, but sadly, it seemed that even if he would offer to give it away, people would not take it.

The way HuoBoPi shook his head made it seem as if it was going to topple off his neck at any time. With a dry laugh, he responded, “How could I afford such a big house? Ever since I met all of you, I have nearly lost all my original capital. It is lucky that I have not had to sell my own house.”

Guo DaLu: “What if he is willing to sell it to you at a bargain price?”

HuoBoPi: “What use would I have for it if I bought it?”

Guo DaLu: “You could turn around and sell it to someone else. Or you could move in here yourself.”

HuoBoPi snickered, “Unless the person is crazy, who would want to live in here?”

Guo DaLu wanted to see if he could still bring in some business, but HuoBoPi unexpectedly asked, “Are you lacking money right now?”

Wang Dong replied with a laugh, “Which day are we not lacking money?”

HuoBoPi: “Would you like to earn an easy five hundred liang of silver?”

“Of course we would.”

But everyone knew that HuoBoPi’s money was not easy to earn. It would be easier to pluck a hair from the head of a tiger. A porcelain rooster [*i.e. a stingy person] has no feathers for you to pluck.

But five hundred liang of silver was just too enticing.

Guo DaLu eyed him up and down a few times before he asked, “Have you been drinking?”

HuoBoPi: “I am very sober. So long as you agree, I am willing to first pay half as a deposit.” He had always trusted this group because he knew that, though they may not have a penny to their name, the words they spoke weighed more than a thousand jin of gold [*i.e. would certainly be kept].

Sighing, Guo DaLu asked him, “What has to be done to earn this money?”

HuoBoPi: “Easy. Once you all take a walk with me to Xiancheng, the money will be in your hands.”

Guo DaLu: “Take a walk? How?”

HuoBoPi: "Naturally, you would use your legs."

Guo DaLu took a couple of steps. "Just like this?"

HuoBoPi: "Mm hm."

Guo DaLu: "And then?"

HuoBoPi: "And then you can bring five hundred liang of silver back here with you."

Guo DaLu: "There is nothing else?"

HuoBoPi: "No."

Guo DaLu looked over at Wang Dong. "You take a walk and then you have earned five hundred liang. Have you ever heard of something like this before?"

Wang Dong: "No."

HuoBoPi: "There are lots of things that you have never heard about, but that may not mean it is not real."

Wang Dong: "You losing money will be real too."

HuoBoPi heaved a sigh. "Business has been getting more and more difficult lately. More people are coming to pawn things but few return to redeem them. Items for which the loan period has expired are not selling either. And the interest I charge is small."

Wang Dong nodded his head. A very sympathetic expression showed on his face. Unable to contain his curiosity, Guo DaLu inquired, "So if it is a money-losing business, why are you still doing it?"

Sighing again, HuoBoPi said, "What else I can do? Ai. Unfortunately, I chose the wrong career."

Wang Dong: "Then you should keep that five hundred liang for yourself to use slowly."

HuoBoPi interrupted quickly, "That is different. I am willingly giving that to you to earn."

In a dull tone, Wang Dong countered, "Your money does not come easily. All we need to do, though, is take a walk with you and we have earned your five hundred liang. How could we not feel ill at ease about something like that?"

HuoBoPi's normally pale face seemed a little flushed. He coughed drily a few times. "What is there to feel ill at ease about? Plus, I, of course, have my reason for asking you to accompany me on a trip."

Wang Dong: "What reason?"

HuoBoPi gave a few more dry coughs. Forcing a smile onto his face, he reassured, "You can set your mind at ease. In any event, I am not going to ask you to be bandits, nor will I tell you to go murder someone."

Wang Dong: "I am not going."

Startled, HuoBoPi asked, "You don't want five hundred liang of silver?"

Wang Dong: "No."

HuoBoPi: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "No reason."

HuoBoPi was silent for a long while, then broke into a smile. "It does not matter. You are the only one who does not want to go; I still..."

Yan Qi cut him off, "He is not alone."

HuoBoPi: "You are not going either?"

Yan Qi: "I am not going and I have no reason as well. Not going means not going."

With a laugh, Lin TaiPing confessed, "I thought I would be the only one who did not want to go, but it turns out we are all thinking in the same way."

HuoBoPi was getting anxious. He cried, "Is my money no good? Haven't you taken it before?"

In an unconcerned tone, Wang Dong responded, "If we want your money, we will bring items to pawn."

HuoBoPi: "I am not taking any of your items this time. I am only asking that you make a short trip with me and then I will give you five hundred liang of silver. But you actually are not willing to accept?"

Wang Dong: "That is right."

HuoBoPi looked like he wanted to jump up from where he was sitting. He yelled, "What is wrong with all of you?... I bet that one day, you will all die of starvation... For people like you, it would be a real oddity if you were not poor."

There really was something wrong with Wang Dong and the others. They would rather die in poverty and of starvation than accept suspicious money of which they did not know the origin. Taking items to pawn was not something to be ashamed of. They had basically pawned nearly every item possible. But they only pawned items; they did not pawn themselves. They could trade in their own pants, but they would never give up their dignity or conscience. They only did things that they were willing to do and thought they should do.

Everyone has to use the lavatory and, in fact, will use it at least seven or eight times a day. This is not filthy or comical; it is merely a very normal and ordinary action that must be done, and therefore, does not deserve to be brought up in this story of ours. If someone were to include this in their writing, then a 100,000 word story would become at least 250,000 words.

But there are some times when going to the bathroom has to be mentioned.

When he was done and had returned to the guest hall, he found that there was something different about the expressions on Yan Qi and Lin TaiPing's faces, as if they had something they needed to say, yet they did not want to speak it out. So, Wang Dong did not ask. He was always one who kept his calm, and he also knew that in a situation like this, if he really wanted to ask, he would be better off waiting for them to say it out themselves.

As expected, Yan Qi could not contain his impatience and suddenly spoke up, "Why aren't you asking?"

Wang Dong: "Asking about what?"

Yan Qi: "You have not noticed that there is someone missing here?"

Wang Dong nodded. "There does seem to be someone missing."

The one that was missing was Guo DaLu.

Yan Qi: "Why aren't you asking where he has gone?"

Wang Dong answered with a little laugh, "Where he has gone truly does not matter, but if you really would like me

to, it is no big deal if I ask either.” He sat down slowly, looked around in all four directions, and then finally asked, “Where has Xiao Guo [*Little Guo] gone?”

Yan Qi gave a cold laugh. “You will never be able to guess.”

Wang Dong: “It’s because I am not able to guess, that is why I am asking.”

Yan Qi bit down on his lip. “He is chasing after HuoBoPi. The instant HuoBoPi left, he went and followed after him.”

Only now did Wang Dong feel that something was odd. His brow furrowed as he wondered, “Why would he chase after HuoBoPi?” Yan Qi’s lips were pressed tightly together and his face was slightly pale. Wang Dong was looking at him as he muttered, “Could it be that for five hundred liang, he is willing to be HuoBoPi’s lackey?” He shook his head in denial. “I refuse to believe it. Xiao Guo is definitely not that kind of person.”

In a chilly tone, Yan Qi said, “I do not want to believe it either, but I have no choice but to believe.”

Wang Dong: “Why?”

End of Chapter 15

Chapter 16 - Misunderstanding

Yan Qi: "Because I saw it with my own eyes."

Wang Dong: "What did you see?"

Yan Qi: "I saw him whispering with HuoBoPi for a long time. HuoBoPi took out an ingot of silver and gave it to him; then, he left with HuoBoPi."

Wang Dong paused for a moment in surprise. "You didn't run over and ask what was going on?"

With another icy laugh, Yan Qi responded, "Why would I run over? I don't want to be HuoBoPi's lackey."

Lin TaiPing gave a sigh as he added, "If it was just being a lackey who followed him in a trip to the city, it would not be a big deal, but I think that it unquestionably cannot be as simple as that."

Of course it was not that simple. If all HuoBoPi wanted was someone to be his lackey, the whole street was filled with people who, for only five coins, would be willing to do it. Why did he have to come all the way here to find them?

Lin TaiPing carried on, "HuoBoPi, himself, said that there was a reason behind what he was doing. In my opinion, it definitely cannot be any sort of good deed."

Yan Qi: "There is only one thing that could make HuoBoPi wholeheartedly willing to bring out five hundred liang."

Lin TaiPing: "What sort of thing?"

Yan Qi: "Something that will make him five thousand liang."

Lin TaiPing: "That is true. If it was not something that is 'one investment, ten thousand returns,' he definitely would not be willing to pull out his wallet and take out five hundred liang."

Yan Qi: "But there is only one type of activity which is truly 'one investment, ten thousand returns': shady activities."

Lin TaiPing: "Correct. I think that if it is not stealing that he is going to do, then it will be deception. He is afraid that, when he is discovered, people will not go easy on him, so that is why he came here to hire us as his bodyguards." He let out a lengthy sigh before carrying on, "Doesn't Guo DaLu understand such logic?"

His smile still cold, Yan Qi replied, "Even you can see the logic, so why would he not understand? It is not as if he is more stupid than other people."

Wang Dong had been paying close attention to the expression on Yan Qi's face the whole time, and now, he suddenly questioned, "So if you believed that he should not have gone, why did you not try to stop him?"

Yan Qi's tone was icy as he retorted, "If an individual really wants to jump into a mud pit, even if people try to stop him, they will not be able to yank him back."

Wang Dong: "And so, all you do then is watch as he jumps?"

Yan Qi bit down hard on his own lip. "I... I..." All of a sudden, he turned around and fled outside. Someone with sharp eyesight would have noticed that his eyes had already filled with tears as he was running out, as if he was so angry he was about to cry.

Wang Dong's eyes were very sharp. He sat there by himself, staring off into the distance for half a day. Sighing, he

murmured, “ ‘The deeper the love, the deeper the sense of blame cuts.’ It seems this saying is not one bit wrong.”

Lin TaiPing broke in, “What did you say?”

Smiling, Wang Dong answered, “I said, even now I still do not believe that Xiao Guo would do something like that. What about you?”

In a hesitant tone, Lin TaiPing said, “I... I do not really believe it either.”

Wang Dong: “You still at least have a bit of doubt, correct?”

Lin TaiPing: “Yes.”

Wang Dong: “But Yan Qi does not have even a hint of doubt. He basically is convinced that Xiao Guo would do something like that. Do you know why?”

Lin TaiPing mulled over the question for a moment. “I thought it was rather peculiar, too. His relationship with Xiao Guo has always seemed to be particularly good.”

Heaving a sigh, Wang Dong explained, “It is because they have a particularly good relationship that he is more easily convinced.”

Lin TaiPing again pondered over his statement. “Why? I don’t understand.”

Wang Dong: “We were all able to realize that there might have been other reasons for Zhu Zhu’s sudden disappearance, but Guo DaLu could not and instead, thought of the worst case scenario. Why is that?”

Lin TaiPing: “Because the love he had for Zhu Zhu was too deep, and so...”

Wang Dong: "So his brain was not thinking clearly, right?"

Lin TaiPing: "Yes."

Love can make a person blind. Most people understand this philosophy.

Wang Dong: "If your feelings for someone are very deep, then the judgments you make of this person will be less accurate because normally, you only see his good aspects. However, once any negative changes or setbacks involving this person occur, you immediately blame yourself and take responsibility, and you start wavering. Hence, you cannot help thinking from the worst possible perspective."

Lin TaiPing let out a chuckle. "I understand what you are trying to say, except your analogy does not seem very appropriate."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

Smiling, Lin TaiPing remarked, "How could you compare the situation between Zhu Zhu and Xiao Guo to this? How can the feelings that Xiao Guo had for Zhu Zhu be even similar to the feelings that Yan Qi has for him?"

Wang Dong started laughing too. It seemed as if he realized that he had said something inappropriate, as if he had said a little too much. Hence, he did not say any more. But he did continue laughing, and in fact, his laughter was rather unusual. Only when he noticed Yan Qi leaving from the courtyard to go outside did he open his mouth and ask, "Do you want to go out?"

Yan Qi's eyes were still red. Straining a smile, he replied, "Today's weather has improved slightly. I want to go hunting."

Lin TaiPing rose to his feet with a smile. "I will go as well. If we do not go hunting today, I'm afraid we may die of hunger."

Wang Dong chuckled, "Since Xiao Guo has money on him, he certainly will not allow us to starve. Why don't you wait until he comes back?"

Yan Qi's face immediately grew stony. "Why must I wait for him?"

Wang Dong: "Let's just say you are doing it for me, okay?"

Yan Qi stood in the courtyard with his head lowered. Even though the sky had cleared, the wind was still so cold that it pierced the bones. Yet, he did not seem the least bit cold. He stood there motionless for a long time before finally saying in a chilly tone, "And if he does not return?"

Wang Dong let out another little laugh. "If he does not return, I will treat you both to a meal of dog cr*p."

Lin TaiPing could not help asking curiously, "Where would you find a dog in this type of weather?"

Wang Dong: "You do not need to go looking for one. There is one in this place."

Lin TaiPing: "Where is the dog?"

Pointing at his own nose, Wang Dong said, "Right here."

Lin TaiPing blinked his eyes as he stifled giggles. "You're a dog?"

Wang Dong: "Not just a dog, an 'earth dog' [*slang for mole cricket]."

Lin TaiPing could suppress his laughter no longer.

Yan Qi was not laughing, though. "If someone cannot even figure out what type of person his friend is, what else could he be aside from a mole cricket?"

Wang Dong was not a mole cricket.

Guo DaLu returned very shortly after. He was carrying a stack of large and small packages. In the small package, there was meat; the large package held mantou; and the smallest one contained peanuts. And, since there were peanuts, that meant there must also be wine. They could do without peanuts but they could not do without wine. Guo DaLu chortled, "I am starting to miss Mai LaoGuang. Ever since he left, I can't seem to find anyone who can make good stewed soy-sauce meats."

Wang Dong: "There is at least one person."

Guo DaLu: "Who?"

Wang Dong: "You. If you were to open up a restaurant, your business definitely would not be bad."

Guo DaLu grinned. "That is not a bad idea, but unfortunately, there is one thing that won't work..."

Wang Dong: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: "No matter how good my restaurant's business is, in less than three days, it will shut down."

Wang Dong: "Why?"

Giggling, Guo DaLu told him, "Even if I don't eat myself out of business, you guys will come and eat until my restaurant folds."

All of a sudden, Yan Qi let out a cold laugh. "Don't worry. I certainly would not eat at your place."

Guo DaLu had still been laughing, but seeing the frosty expression on Yan Qi's face, he paused in shock. "You are angry. What have I done to offend you?"

Yan Qi: "You should know."

With a bitter little smile, Guo DaLu asked, "What should I know? I don't understand at all."

Ignoring him, Yan Qi walked up to Wang Dong and said, "You may not be a mole cricket, but there is a 'running dog' [*word for lackey or minion] here. A mole cricket is not a big deal, but I cannot stand lackeys."

Guo DaLu's eyes widened as he cried incredulously, "Who is a lackey?" Yan Qi still paid no attention to him. With an icy snicker, he started to walk towards the door. Guo DaLu's eyes flashed, as if he suddenly understood. He rushed forward to block his way. "You think I have become HuoBoPi's minion? You think I bought all these things with the deposit he brought?"

Yan Qi retorted, "So did all of this fall from the sky? Or did they grow from the earth?"

Guo DaLu's eyes were fixed steadily on him. A long time passed until he suddenly heaved a lengthy sigh. He muttered, "Fine, fine... If you say I am a lackey, then I'm a lackey... You can't stand me, then I will leave." He walked out slowly, right past Wang Dong. Wang Dong rose to his feet, as if he wanted to stop him, but then sat back down.

Guo DaLu walked out to the courtyard. Lifting his head, he watched as individual flakes of snow were blown from the

trees where they had accumulated, sprinkling down until they covered him. He stood there motionless.

The snowflakes melted on his face, water trickling down his cheeks. He stood unmoving. He wanted to go somewhere far away, but, for some reason, found that he could not move.

Yan Qi did not cast a glance towards the courtyard. Perhaps he no longer saw anything. His eyes had grown red again. Suddenly, with a stomp of his foot, he dashed towards the other door.

But Wang Dong's hand had stretched out to bar his way. "First take a look to see what this is." His hand held something.

His hand held something. It was a brightly colored piece of paper.

Yan Qi, of course, knew what it was. He had several similar pieces of paper on him too. "It's a pawn ticket."

Wang Dong: "Take a closer look. What item was pawned?"

The writing on a pawn ticket is like that on a doctor's prescription: it looks like 'a talisman drawn by a ghost' [* i.e. illegible]. Unless a person is very experienced, he would have no hope of recognizing even one word. Yan Qi was very experienced. He had seen many pawn tickets from HuoBoPi.

"One old, shabby gold necklace. One old, shabby gold pendant. Total weight of seven liang, nine qian [* qian = unit of weight equal to five grams]. Pawned for silver, fifty liang."

Once they enter a pawnshop, things that are obviously still in new condition will suddenly become old and shabby. This is the rule in every pawnshop. Not one of them had found

this unusual. However, saying that a gold necklace could be "shabby" was rather unconvincing and seemed to be stretching things a bit.

Yan Qi nearly laughed out loud, but sadly, nothing would come out. He looked like someone had slapped him across the face. His whole body was frozen.

A nonchalant smile on his face, Wang Dong informed him, "I just lifted this pawn ticket off of Xiao Guo. Did I not tell all of you before? If I had changed professions and become a pickpocket, I would have been rich a long time ago." Sighing, he mumbled to himself, "But unfortunately, I am too lazy to move now."

Yan Qi did not move either, but tears were slowly rolling over his cheeks...

"Even the best of friends at times can have misunderstandings." So, if you should have any misunderstandings with your friend, you must find an opportunity to explain things to him.

"One situation can be looked at from many perspectives. If you always look at things from the negative perspective, then you are abusing yourself." That is why, no matter what setbacks you may encounter, you should find ways to seek out the bright side of the situation.

No one wants to abuse others, nor should he abuse himself. This was Wang Dong's conclusion. Wang Dong's conclusions were usually very accurate. If a conclusion is accurate, everyone should take it to heart.

There is nothing in this world that is definitely good or definitely bad. Failure may be bad, but "failure is the mother

of success.” Success may be good, but success often leads to a person becoming prideful and arrogant so that failure will follow again.

When you befriend someone, naturally you hope that you can become close friends. But even though being close to your friends is, of course, a good thing, when you are too close, it is easy to take one another for granted and then misunderstandings will arise.

Misunderstandings may be awful, but if friends can explain things clearly to each other, in the end, they will understand one another better and their friendship will deepen to another level.

But no matter what, it is not a very pleasant feeling to be accused wrongly. And if there is one thing worse than being wrongly accused once, it is being wrongly accused two times in a row. Yan Qi had been mistakenly blamed for something before, and so he knew what Guo DaLu was feeling right then. In his heart, he felt even worse than Guo DaLu.

Besides feeling miserable, there was also some sort of sensation in his heart that nobody but himself could understand. All he wanted to do was have a heartfelt cry. It had been a long time since he had had a good cry because he was a man and a man should not weep like that.

Ai! To be a man truly is not easy.

Obviously, he knew that he should go find Guo DaLu, but what should he say to him? Some words, he did not want to say; some words, he could not say; and some words, he just did not dare say. His heart was in turmoil. He did not know what to do.

From nowhere, a hand reached out in front of him. It held a cup. He heard someone say to him, "Drink this cup of wine and then it will be truce between us, okay?" His heart leapt. Lifting his head, he saw Guo DaLu.

Guo DaLu's face did not show any anger or sadness on it. He looked the same as always, grinning broadly at Yan Qi. Normally, Yan Qi frowned upon such an expression, that cheeky smile and casual attitude. He had always felt that a person should act a bit more proper and well-behaved.

Yet, right then, for some reason, he suddenly did not find that expression the least bit annoying. In fact, it was extremely lovable. He even hoped that Guo DaLu would forever be this way, that he would never draw his face into a frown. He realized this was the true Guo DaLu that he liked: carefree and lighthearted. Even if someone offended him, he would not take it to heart.

Guo DaLu beamed, "Are you willing to have a truce?"

Yan Qi's head hung down and he quavered, "You... you are not mad?"

Guo DaLu: "At first, I was furious, but then I thought about it and not only was I not angry, I in fact became happy."

Yan Qi: "Happy?"

Guo DaLu: "If you did not care about me, even if I was a b*stard, it would not concern you and you would not need to get upset over it. It is only because you are my good friend that you got angry with me."

Yan Qi: "But... I should not have wrongly accused you, and I should have trusted you."

Guo DaLu giggled, "It doesn't matter if you blame me or if you punch me a couple of times. So long as you are my friend, you can do whatever you want and it won't matter."

Yan Qi laughed. When he laughed, his nose would crinkle up a little bit and his eyes would first sparkle with a smile. His face was still stained with tears. Snow white tear streaks appeared where they had passed over what had originally been a dark and dirty face. They were like sunlight amidst a sky filled with gloomy clouds.

Guo DaLu was gazing at him as if he was dazed. Lowering his head again, Yan Qi asked, "What are you staring at me for?"

Guo DaLu chuckled a bit, then sighed, "I was thinking, Sour Plum Soup has a pretty discerning eye. If you would wash your face, you would definitely be a striking lad and maybe even better looking than me."

Yan Qi tried to pull his face into a frown, but he could not stop a "pfft" from escaping as he giggled and accepted the cup of wine.

Wang Dong looked at Lin TaiPing; Lin TaiPing looked back at Wang Dong. They both broke into laughter.

Lin TaiPing was grinning as he said, "I usually do not like wine, but today, I really want to guzzle it until I am drunk."

In life, it is hard to come by a few times when you can get [satisfyingly] drunk. They had just gone through something like this. If right now was not an appropriate time to get drunk, then when would be the right time?

Guo DaLu sighed unexpectedly, "It's a pity that I cannot get drunk with all of you today."

Lin TaiPing: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because I still have something I need to do. I need to take a trip to down the mountain." This guy would not sit still in this place once he had money.

Yan Qi nibbled on his own lip. "What are you going to do down the mountain?"

Blinking, Guo DaLu chortled, "I have a date with someone."

Yan Qi's expression seemed to change slightly. He turned his face away quietly. "With whom?"

Guo DaLu: "HuoBoPi."

Yan Qi's eyes immediately sparkled with delight, but he deliberately put a scowl onto his face. "You arranged something with him?"

Guo DaLu: "He did not arrange anything with me, but I am going to go find him."

Yan Qi: "What for?"

Guo DaLu: "He was willing to bring out five hundred liang so that means he must have some dishonest scheme planned. I want to see whose skin he plans to flay."

The snow was starting to melt. The mountain paths that had been covered in snow were now all muddy. But Yan Qi did not care. He stepped through the mud like he was walking on clouds. This was because Guo DaLu was by his side. He could even sense Guo DaLu's breathing.

Guo DaLu suddenly gave a laugh. "I discovered something again today."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "I discovered that Wang Laoda understands me very well. I don't think I can find another person in this world who understands me like he does."

Yan Qi nodded as he remarked quietly, "He really does understand others. Not only you. He understands everyone."

Guo DaLu: "But the one who has the most compassion for me is Lin TaiPing. I can tell."

Yan Qi hesitated, but finally could not help asking, "What about me?"

Guo DaLu: "You don't understand me, nor are you compassionate to me. Not only are you fierce to me, you will also quarrel and get in fights with me at any time..." Yan Qi's head hung low. Guo DaLu gave a sudden grin and continued, "But for some reason, I have this feeling that you care about me the most."

Yan Qi smiled charmingly. His cheeks seemed to have a hint of pink. A long time passed before he asked softly, "And you?"

Guo DaLu: "There are times when I am so angry with you I could die. Take today as an example: if it was Wang Laoda who had acted that way towards me, I actually would not have been so livid and maybe would have even immediately tried to explain everything to him. But you..."

Yan Qi: "You could only get mad at me?"

Guo DaLu sighed, "That's only because I seem to treat you particularly special." Groaning, he added, "How special? I cannot seem to explain."

Yan Qi: "If you cannot explain it, then it can't be real."

Guo DaLu: "But I can draw an analogy: for Wang Laoda, I would be willing to pawn all my clothes so that the only thing I wore when I returned was my underpants." He grinned and carried on, "For you, though, I could pawn even that pair of underpants."

Yan Qi smiled sweetly as disagreed, "Who would want your ripped underpants?" His face flushed again after he asked the question. How would he know that Guo DaLu's underpants were ripped? Fortunately, his face was filthy and black. Even if he was blushing, no one would be able to tell. However, if someone did not notice that expression on his face, that gentle and sweet smile that was so bashful, then that person was an idiot – a blind idiot.

Guo DaLu gazed into his eyes. He beamed unexpectedly and said, "I have another analogy."

Yan Qi: "Go ahead and say it."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "Even though I vowed that I would never marry, if you were a girl, I would definitely take you as my wife."

Yan Qi: "Whoever ends up as your wife will have the misfortune of poverty for eight lifetimes." There was something not quite right about his voice. He sped up his pace unexpectedly so that he was walking in front.

At that moment, the sky suddenly cleared. A cord of golden sunlight broke through the clouds and radiated down. It shone down on the earth, on Yan Qi, and also on Guo DaLu. This sunlight seemed to be shining just for them.

End of Chapter 16

Chapter 17 - Whose Skin Will Be Flayed?

HuoBoPi's pawnshop was called "Li Yuan Pawnshop." It was across from Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meats restaurant. Mai LaoGuang's shop sign had already been taken down and right then, some people were whitewashing the storefront.

As their thoughts turned to Mai LaoGuang, Guo DaLu and Yan Qi could not help feeling a twinge of sadness. After all, they had had many happy moments there. They were not melancholy and moody people, but they were very easily moved by many things.

A horse-drawn carriage was stopped in front of Li Yuan Pawnshop. The door of the pawnshop was closed. It seemed that it was not planning on opening for business today.

A glance passed between Guo DaLu and Yan Qi. In the small side alley that they had just walked through, they saw HuoBoPi creep out of a side door, his shoulders hunched, his eyes sneakily assessing all four directions, and his arms wrapped tightly around a cloth bundle. Seeing no one, he jumped straight away into the carriage. The carriage door closed immediately, and even the blinds on the windows were lowered.

An old woman walked out at a snail's pace from inside the pawnshop. In her hands, she carried a bucket of garbage. Guo DaLu, of course, knew who she was. She was not HuoBoPi's wife but merely someone who cooked and did odds and ends for him. Since she was so old, aside from providing her with meals, HuoBoPi would not pay a single coin to her as wages.

However, when there were things he wanted her to do, he would use her like she was a strapping young man. Guo DaLu had always found it strange that the old woman was willing to keep working for him. With an employer like HuoBoPi, if for some rare chance she had an unexpected misfortune and died suddenly, there may not even be a coffin for her.

HuoBoPi's voice was heard shouting loudly from inside the carriage. "Close the door. Make sure you do not allow anyone to go inside. I will be back tomorrow morning." With that, the driver flicked his whip and the carriage darted down the avenue.

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi dashed out from the narrow lane. One on each side, they jumped onto the shaft of the carriage. The window immediately flew open and HuoBoPi thrust his head out looking visibly shocked. When he saw them, he was even more stunned. "What do you want to do?"

Guo DaLu let out a laugh and answered, "Nothing. We just want to take a free ride in your carriage to the city."

HuoBoPi shook his head and snapped, "That won't work. I had said that no one could ride in this."

With a wide grin, Guo DaLu said, "If it won't work, then you make it work. Since we are already on the coach, are you going to push us off?"

Yan Qi smiled as he added, "Plus, you had wanted to hire us to make this trip with you anyway."

HuoBoPi: "The one I wanted to find wasn't you two..." He suddenly seemed to realize that he had said the wrong thing and immediately pressed his lips together.

Yan Qi: "Not us? Could it be that you changed your mind?"

HuoBoPi's face looked like it was starting to go pale. Putting a smile on his face, he consented, "If you want to ride with me, it is fine, but you must pay a fare. The cost of the carriage was three qian. This is perfect, each person pays one qian." As his left hand took their money, his right hand opened the door for them right away.

There was one good thing about people like HuoBoPi: as long as you had money for him, he was able to make you feel that each cent was not spent unjustly. He even offered to them the two seats that were relatively better.

Now that Guo DaLu was in the carriage, he started to move onto another plan.

HuoBoPi's arms were still tightly clutching that cloth bundle. He piped up, "Yan Qi, how about we make a bet?"

Yan Qi: "What are we betting on?"

Guo DaLu: "I bet that there is a mouse inside his cloth bundle. Do you believe it?"

Yan Qi: "Nope."

Guo DaLu: "Fine. I will bet ten liang of silver with you."

HuoBoPi interrupted them with a laugh, "You do not need to bet. I know that the two of you want to see what is inside this bundle of mine, correct?"

Guo DaLu confessed, "It seems there is a bit of that idea."

HuoBoPi: "You can see, but there is a fee for looking."

Guo DaLu really had not thought that he would agree to this so easily. He had been certain that the bundle must have something that HuoBoPi did not want people to see.

Once HuoBoPi's left hand had received the money, his right hand immediately untied the bundle. Inside, there was merely some old clothing. Guo DaLu looked over at Yan Qi; Yan Qi looked back at Guo DaLu. They two of them could only give a bitter smile.

HuoBoPi smirked, "Are you two thinking now that your ten liang of silver was spent in vain? Too bad you cannot take it back anymore!" A smug smile on his face, he started to tie up the cloth bundle again.

All of a sudden, Yan Qi noticed, "One of the items of clothing inside the bundle seems to belong to Lin TaiPing. Is that right?"

HuoBoPi gave a couple of dry coughs. "It seems so. Anyway, he has pawned it to me."

Yan Qi protested, "The pawn ticket has not expired yet. He could redeem it at any time. How can you take it away?"

It was gradually getting more difficult for HuoBoPi to laugh. "Naturally, when he wants to redeem it, I will have his clothes to give him."

Guo DaLu inquired, "How much did he pawn this garment for?"

HuoBoPi: "One liang, five qian."

Guo DaLu: "Alright, I will redeem it for him right now."

HuoBoPi: "Out of the question."

Guo DaLu: "Even with money it's out of the question?"

HuoBoPi: "You have money but you also need the pawn ticket. That is the policy when you run a pawnshop. Did you

bring the pawn ticket along?”

Guo DaLu glanced over at Yan Qi again. Neither of them spoke, but they both felt that something was peculiar. What did HuoBoPi want to do by bringing Lin TaiPing's clothes into the city? Though the material on the garment was quite good, it was already old and worn. Why was he hugging it so tightly, as if it was a treasure?

Why was he hugging it so tightly, as if it was a treasure?

Once the carriage pulled into the city, HuoBoPi announced, “We are in the area. You can get off the carriage.”

Yan Qi: “You do not want us to stroll around with you?”

HuoBoPi: “It is not necessary now. ‘One's own biological son is not as good as the coin by one's hand.’ If you can save one, then you should do so.”

Yan Qi: “What if we were willing to do it for free?”

HuoBoPi smirked, “Even more out of the question if it is free. The only business transactions that are reliable are the ones that are completed in cash. Things that are free always come with some trouble.”

Exhaling a sigh, Yan Qi said, “Well then, let's get off the carriage.”

HuoBoPi: “My apologies for not seeing you out.”

Yan Qi and Guo DaLu had just gotten off the coach when he closed the door with a “bang!” Guo DaLu watched as the carriage drove forward. He gave a sigh also and remarked, “That man is such a sly old scoundrel. I really cannot see through to what cunning scheme he may have.”

Yan Qi murmured to him, "He leaked out something a moment ago. He said that we are not the ones he was looking for. Did you hear that?"

Guo DaLu nodded.

Yan Qi: "Could it be that he was only looking for Lin TaiPing, that we were just along for the ride?"

Guo DaLu: "What would he want with Lin TaiPing?"

Yan Qi: "I have always had a feeling that Lin TaiPing also has a secret."

Guo DaLu mumbled to himself for a while. Unexpectedly, he speculated, "Do you think he might actually be a girl dressed up as a man?"

Yan Qi threw a glare at him and snapped, "I think you have listened to too many stories. Such novel things do not occur in the real world."

Guo DaLu did not reply.

When the carriage turned onto another street, at the same time, they both quickened their steps and chased after it. They still were not willing to give up. The carriage stopped in front of the doorway of a large inn. The fact that someone like HuoBoPi was willing to splurge and stay in such an inn was yet again another strange event.

Fortunately, the sky had grown dark already. Winter nights always arrive especially early. They circled to the back of the inn. With a flip, they brushed over the wall and were inside.

No one has bad luck forever. This time, their luck seemed to be particularly good. They had just descended onto a treetop when they saw HuoBoPi crossing the rear courtyard

towards the row of rooms in the wing and enter into one of them.

It was still very cold. Not even the shadow of a person was seen in the courtyard.

They swept down off the tree. In three or five up and downs, they had already jumped onto the roof of that row of rooms. They both suddenly realized that each other's lightness kung fu was quite good. It was as if they both were born with the makings to do things like this. Each of them made a note to himself: in the future, he would have to ask the other how he had trained to get such lightness kung fu. It seemed that these two had changed; for some reason, they wanted to know each other's secrets.

Icicles had formed on the eaves of this roof also. Needless to say, the windows were tightly shut. Luckily, a fire was burning inside the house, and so a small skylight was open to allow air in. Looking in from this opening, they could just clearly see everything that was happening inside.

In the room, aside from HuoBoPi, were two other people, their attire splendid and their manner haughty. The expressions on their faces were dark, as if all the people in the world owed them money and had not paid them back yet. In one glance, Yan Qi could tell that, not only were the martial arts of these two not weak at all, they were actually experienced people of jianghu.

On the face of one of them was a long knife scar, making him seem even more daunting. The other man may not have had a scar on his face, but one of his arms had been chopped off. His empty sleeve was tucked into his

waistband. A curved saber was also inserted slantingly into the waistband.

It was not often that such a saber was seen in jianghu. A man who could still wield that saber with only one arm was obviously very skilled. In addition, were he not someone who frequently went through life and death situations, he would not have sustained such a serious injury.

To be one who frequently faced life and death and, yet, still be able to live to this day and to also carry such a proud manner meant that he was not one to be provoked. Guo DaLu could not figure out why HuoBoPi would do business with people like these.

HuoBoPi had unwrapped the bundle, pulled out Lin TaiPing's garment, and presented it on the table in front of the two men. A self-satisfied expression was on his face, like he was offering up a treasure. What sort of treasure could Lin TaiPing's worn garment be?

The large man with the knife scar picked up the article of clothing and looked over it carefully. He passed it to the one-armed man. As the man turned it over, Guo DaLu noticed that there seemed to be something embroidered on the lining of one of the corners, but he could not tell whether it was words or flowers that had been stitched. The one-armed man also turned the corner over to look. He slowly nodded his head and affirmed, "This is right. It is his garment."

HuoBoPi smiled at them. "Of course it is not wrong. I have always been one who was reliable when it comes to business matters."

The one-armed man asked, "Where is he now?"

HuoBoPi did not answer but instead, stretched out his hand.

One-armed man: "You want it now?"

Grinning, HuoBoPi replied, "Anyone who runs a pawnshop will only complete his business transactions when the actual goods are present. I am certain you two sirs know that as well."

The one-armed man said coldly, "Fine. Give it to him."

At once, the man with the scar reached down and lifted up a cloth bundle. He placed it onto the table with a "thump." A very heavy cloth bundle. "There is only one thing that could make HuoBoPi willing to bring out five hundred liang: something that will make him five thousand liang."

Evidently, Yan Qi's words had not been wrong. There was at least five thousand liang inside that cloth bundle.

Guo DaLu threw a glance over at Yan Qi. He finally understood. These two men must be looking for Lin TaiPing and, in fact, very urgently such that they were willing to offer up five thousand liang of silver as a reward. HuoBoPi had known about this a long time ago, but only when he saw the garment did he realize that Lin TaiPing was the person they were looking for.

Therefore, he had wanted Lin TaiPing to accompany him to the city so that he could present him directly to these two men. If he could personally deliver the person they wanted to them, the reward would naturally be even greater.

But what had Lin TaiPing done that made it worthwhile for people to spend so much money in order to find him?

The instant HuoBoPi saw the money, he suddenly became extremely lovable, his smile so wide that his eyes could not be seen.

The man with the knife scar asked, "Now can you tell us where he is?"

Regardless of what Lin TaiPing had done, if he wanted to hide from these two men, then they could not be allowed to find him. Guo DaLu was ready to rush in through the window. But right then, the smile on HuoBoPi's face froze.

His eyes stared straight at the doorway; his mouth was gaping open, yet unable to speak. The look on his face was like someone had suddenly stuffed his mouth full of mud. Guo DaLu's eyes followed the direction of his gaze. He immediately became stunned as well. No one knew when, but someone had entered the doorway.

No one knew when, but someone had entered the doorway.

She was merely a very ordinary old woman. There was nothing shocking about her. But even in Guo DaLu's dreams, he would not have thought that he would see her here at this moment, this place. It was only a while ago that he had seen her standing in front of the door of Li Yuan Pawnshop carrying a bucket of garbage. And then, they had ridden a horse drawn carriage here without stopping along the way. How did this old woman get here? Could she have flown?

When HuoBoPi saw who it was, he looked as if he had seen a ghost. He rasped, "You... what are you doing here?"

In the old woman's hands was a covered bowl. She walked into the room extremely slowly. Shaking her head and sighing, she chided, "It is time for you to take your medication. Why do you always forget? I came here specially to bring it to you. Hurry and drink it."

As HuoBoPi took the bowl from her, all that was heard was the "ge ge" rattling sound of the lid against the bowl. His

hands were shaking, and he had also broken into a cold sweat.

There was still not a trace of expression on the face of the one-armed man or the man with the knife scar. All the while, they had been watching the old woman with a cold stare. Then at that moment, they suddenly struck together, two dark beams of light flying towards that covered bowl.

Their attack had not been slow, but as those two dark beams reached the woman, they unexpectedly disappeared. The old woman, though, unmistakably had not moved. The expression on the knife-scarred man's face shifted slightly. The one-armed man's face, though, was still blank as he smiled icily and said, "I did not realize that you were a fighter of high skill. Good, very good."

The old woman gave a surprising laugh. "Not good, not good at all."

One-armed man: "What is not good?"

Old woman: "What is good? Now that you have encountered me, you will have bad luck. What could be good about that?"

The one-armed man suddenly jumped to his feet and stood up straight. In a sharp tone, he cried, "Who are you really? How dare you meddle in our business?"

Old woman: "Who cares about your business? Your business is not worth my time to manage. Even if you invited me to take care of it or got on your knees and begged me, I would not bother." Old women have a tendency to go on and on when they talk.

One-armed man: "Then what are you here to do?"

Old woman: "I came here to tell him to take his medicine. Hurry and take it. After you have had your medicine, you should go sleep." With a look of anguish on his face, HuoBoPi pinched his nose and swallowed the medicine. The old woman praised, "Good. Now go back and sleep." As if she was towing a little child, she dragged HuoBoPi towards the door.

All of a sudden, there was a flash of saber light. The one-armed man soared into the air. A curved saber that shone like snow came chopping down right at her head. The saber skills of someone who could strike while in mid-air certainly could not be weak.

But there was only a single flash of saber light before it disappeared. A curved saber that shone like snow had suddenly broken into two pieces. "Dong." It fell to the ground next to the one-armed man.

For some reason, he was now kneeling on the ground in front of the old woman, his forehead covered in beads of sweat. He looked as if he wanted to stand, but using his entire body's strength, he still could not rise to his feet.

Heaving a sigh, the old woman nagged, "I had already said earlier, even if you were on your knees begging me, I would not concern myself with your business. This person did not actually listen. Could it be that his ears are even deafer than mine?" She hobbled outside, all the while prattling on with her words. HuoBoPi followed obediently behind her, not daring to even exhale a slightly bigger breath.

With a head also coated in sweat, the man with the knife scar spoke up, "Qianbei [* (in respect) elder; older generation], please wait a moment."

Old woman: "Wait for what now? Would you like to kowtow to me as well?"

The knife-scarred man answered, "Since qianbei you have already stretched forward a hand and intervened in this situation, I do not have much I can say. I only hope that, qianbei, you would leave a name or title so that when I return to my master, I have something to report to him."

Old woman: "You are asking for my name?"

He replied, "I respectfully request it."

Old woman: "You are still not worthy to know my name. And even if I told you, you would not know it." She added unexpectedly, "But you can go back and tell that master of yours that an old friend advises him, the young child really deserves compassion. It would be best if your master does not drive him too hard, otherwise other people may frown upon his actions." She shuffled slowly out the door.

The knife-scarred man immediately chased after her to the door. He seemed to have more that he wanted to ask. But outside the door, there was not even a shadow. The old woman and HuoBoPi had suddenly disappeared.

This old woman who cooked and cleaned was actually an elite skill fighter. Her martial art was so powerful that it was inconceivable to others, even in their dreams. It was understandable now why, that day, after Golden Lion and GunZi had searched the pawnshop, their attitudes had been so respectful when they left.

If they had not had to suffer mutely at her hands, then they must have recognized who she was. At last, Guo DaLu and

Yan Qi understood. However, there was something that puzzled them even more.

The two of them exchanged a glance, then at the same time, soared backwards. Behind them was a large tree. There were no leaves on that tree, only snow that had collected on it.

Yan Qi could only crouch in the fork of its branches. Guo DaLu, though, sat his buttocks down right onto it before immediately jumping back to his feet like he had been stabbed by a knife. The snow was as cold as a knife.

Yan Qi sighed at him and shook his head. "Before you sit down, do you ever take a look to see what is beneath your butt?"

With a painful smile on his face, Guo DaLu admitted, "I did not pay attention. I was thinking about something." The branch was very wide. He squatted down next to Yan Qi. "I was thinking about that old woman. She evidently is amongst the uppermost fighters in wulin. Why would she work as a maidservant at HuoBoPi's pawnshop?"

Yan Qi thought out loud, "Perhaps she is like Feng QiWu and wants to hide from the pursuit of others."

Guo DaLu: "This reason, at first, seems to explain things sufficiently, but when you think over it carefully, there are many points that do not make sense."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "The world is so big; there are many places that can be used as a hiding place where people cannot track you down. This is especially true for a powerful fighter like her. Why would she need to be someone's servant, to listen to someone else's orders and get pushed around?"

He was shaking his head as he continued, "And even if she really wanted to be someone's servant, she should at least find a person who is a little more decent and a place that is more presentable. Why would she choose HuoBoPi?"

Yan Qi: "You cannot figure it out?"

Guo DaLu: "I really cannot."

Yan Qi: "If you cannot solve it, then of course other people will not be able to either."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "If I cannot figure something out, then there are not many who can."

Yan Qi: "Maybe what she wants is that people cannot figure her out?"

Guo DaLu: "But there are lots of other things that I haven't been able to work out as well."

Yan Qi: "Say it out for me to hear."

Guo DaLu: "From observing her martial art, there are very few people in the world who are a match for her."

Yan Qi sighed, "Her martial art truly is very strong. Not only have I never seen anyone with skills as powerful as hers, I have not even heard of it."

Guo DaLu: "That is why I believe that she really has no need to fear other people, nor does she need to hide."

Yan Qi: "Do not forget: 'amongst the strong there is a hand that is stronger; there is always one mountain higher than the next.' "

Guo DaLu: "That's just a saying that is so old its teeth are falling out."

Yan Qi: "Sayings that are old enough for teeth to fall out usually are the ones that make the most sense. The older the saying, the more sense it has."

End of Chapter 17

Chapter 18 - Lin TaiPing's Secret

Guo DaLu further explained, "If she really is hiding because people are trying to track her down, then at least her actions should be more secretive. Yet every time I was at the pawnshop, I would see her everywhere, walking in and out. She did not seem like she afraid of people seeing her at all."

Yan Qi: "At the time, could you tell what type of person she was? Since people could not even tell who she was, why should she need to be afraid of being seen?"

Guo DaLu: "You think that she did the same thing as Feng QiWu, that she altered her own appearance and disguised herself?"

Yan Qi: "Feng QiWu is not the only person in jianghu who knows the art of disguises."

Guo DaLu: "Then how could Golden Lion and GunZi recognize her in one glance?"

Yan Qi: "How do you know they recognized her when they saw her?"

Guo DaLu: "If they hadn't recognized her, why was it that they were so arrogant to HuoBoPi at first but then later became respectful?"

Yan Qi blinked at him. "Well then, in your opinion, what do you think was going on?"

Guo DaLu: "In my opinion, she and HuoBoPi must have some sort of special relationship; perhaps she is his old friend or perhaps she is his relative. Do you think that is reasonable?"

Yan Qi: "Yes."

Guo DaLu beamed, "I never thought you would admit that my thinking is reasonable."

Yan Qi gave a little chuckle. "That is because that is what I was thinking in the first place."

Guo DaLu stopped for a moment. "If that is what you had been thinking, why did you argue with me just now?"

Yan Qi: "Because I naturally like to disagree with you."

Guo DaLu gawked wide-eyed at him for a long time. "What if I said this snow is white?"

Yan Qi giggled, "Then I would say it is black."

No matter how smart and capable you may be, there are times when you may come across your nemesis. No matter how great your abilities may be, the instant you meet your nemesis, you will not be able to use any of them. It seemed that Yan Qi was Guo DaLu's nemesis; Guo DaLu was unable to do anything against him.

Quite a long while passed before he suddenly let out a little laugh and remarked, "At least there is still one thing that you have to admit."

Yan Qi: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu chuckled, "This time, HuoBoPi did not flay a single person's skin."

Yan Qi disagreed, "You are wrong again."

With a sour smile, Guo DaLu sighed, "I am wrong again."

Yan Qi: "HuoBoPi flayed at least one person."

Guo DaLu: "Who?"

Yan Qi: "Himself."

Who was Lin TaiPing? Why were people willing to spend several thousand liang to find him? For what reason did they want to find him?

Guo DaLu asked, "Why do you think these people want to find Lin TaiPing?" This time he had learned and was wiser. He did not first offer his opinion.

Yan Qi mused, "What would make you willing to spend five, six thousand liang of silver to find someone?"

Guo DaLu laughed and replied, "I would never do something like that."

Glaring at him, Yan Qi demanded, "What if I suddenly disappeared? Would you be willing to spend five or six thousand liang to find me?"

Without needing to think, Guo DaLu answered immediately, "Of course I would. For you, even if I was told to pawn my own head, it would not matter."

Yan Qi's eyes shone brightly. Only in times of great joy and great elation will one's eyes shine.

Guo DaLu carried on, "It is because we are really good friends, that is why I would be willing. However, Lin TaiPing is definitely not a friend of those two men. He would never befriend people like them."

Yan Qi nodded in agreement. "What if someone killed me? Would you also be willing to spend five thousand liang of silver to seek him out?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course. Even if it meant putting my life on the line, I would still hunt that person down and avenge you." He suddenly stopped and shook his head. "But Lin TaiPing for sure has never killed anyone. That look of pain that he had when he thought he had killed NanGong Chou absolutely could not have been an act."

Yan Qi speculated, "If someone stole five thousand liang of silver from you, certainly you would be willing to pay another five thousand liang to track that person down."

Guo DaLu: "But when Lin TaiPing arrived, he did not have a single coin on him. Furthermore, he just is not that type of person."

Letting out a little laugh, Yan Qi protested, "Now it's not me trying to argue with you; you are the one who is arguing with me."

Guo DaLu giggled also. "That's because I know that you do not really believe any of what you suggested."

Yan Qi gave a sigh. Smiling cynically, he said, "To be honest, I cannot think of any reason why they would want to find Lin TaiPing."

With a grin on his face, Guo DaLu said, "Even though we may not be able to think of anything, we can always ask. Do not forget that I have learned many interrogation techniques from GunZi."

The light was still aglow inside the house. They had not seen anyone enter or leave. They had been all set to go back in and ask for an explanation when the window opened unexpectedly. Someone was standing in the window beckoning with one hand. They were trying to figure out who this person was waving to when they heard, "It must be

really chilly up there in the tree. Why don't you two sirs come in and warm up by the fire?"

The fire was roaring. It really was much more comfortable beside the fire than in the tree.

The person who had signaled to them from the window a moment ago was now seated. This individual was neither the man with the knife scar nor the ferocious looking one-armed man. In fact, this person previously had not even been in the room. And it was unknown where the people who had been in the room had gone. Guo DaLu had not seen them come out or seen this individual go inside.

There was only one point in all this that Guo DaLu could find consolation in: from head to toe and whatever angle you looked, this person was much more pleasant on the eyes than the previous two. Most importantly, this person was a woman.

Everyone has their own unique method of categorizing women into several different classes. No matter what way you chose, though, this woman would be considered first class. Even though she no longer was young, she still was very beautiful and elegant. There are women in this world that can cause you to not pay attention to their age at all. She was one of them. Most beautiful women are very arrogant and unreasonable, and only a small number are an exception – she was an exception.

What was unusual, though, was why would such a woman all of a sudden appear in this room? What was her relationship to the previous two men? And what connection did she have to this whole matter? Naturally, Guo DaLu wanted to ask, but he had not had the chance. Every time he wanted to

ask, he found that he had already been addressed with a question. When such a woman asks you something, you have no choice but to first provide an answer to her.

“My family name is Wei.” With a faint smile on her face, she inquired, “And you two sirs?” Her smile carried an effect where people could not refuse to answer her questions.

Guo DaLu jumped in to be the first to answer. “My surname is Guo. His is Yan. Yan as in swallow [yan zi = a swallow (bird)].” Yan Qi threw a glower in his direction.

Wei furen [* furen = madam] chimed in laughter, “I know all of Lin TaiPing’s friends. How come I had never seen the two of you before?”

Guo DaLu had wanted to rush in to answer again, but he suddenly noticed Yan Qi’s eyes staring fiercely at him. He lowered his head and coughed drily. Yan Qi’s eyes finally shifted away from him and onto Madam Wei, and he responded in an offhand tone, “How do you know that we are Lin TaiPing’s friends?”

Madam Wei reasoned, “The two of you braved the wind and snow to rush here from the pawnshop, and then you endured the wind and snow again as you waited outside for such a long time. Certainly, you were not doing all this for the pawnshop owner.

Yan Qi: “Why not?”

Madam Wei smiled charmingly and explained, “Dragons befriend dragons, and phoenixes befriend phoenixes. Friends of mice will also burrow tunnels. That type of person will make that same type of friends. I still am able to see this point.”

Yan Qi blinked. "If that is the case, then you must also know Lin TaiPing?"

Madam Wei nodded her head.

Chuckling, Yan Qi corrected himself, "Actually, I should not have even asked that. You know all of his friends. Of course you are very familiar with Lin TaiPing."

Madam Wei smiled lightly. "We certainly can be considered quite familiar with each other."

Yan Qi: "The next time you see him, please ask him how he is for us and tell him that we miss him."

Madam Wei: "I would really like to see him also, which is why I specifically came to consult with you two sirs."

Yan Qi: "What would you like to consult?"

Madam Wei: "I respectfully request you two sirs to tell me, where has he been these last couple of days?"

Yan Qi put on a look of astonishment. "You are even closer to him than we are. How could you not know where he is?"

With a little laugh, Madam Wei replied, "No matter how close friends may be, it is still very normal if they have not seen each other for a long time."

Yan Qi exhaled a lengthy sigh as he lamented, "And I was hoping to ask you to bring us to see him."

Madam Wei: "You also do not know where he is?"

Yan Qi: "If even you do not know where he is, how could I know? I do not even know a single one of his friends." He stood suddenly and, cupping his fist respectfully, said, "The time is late now. We must bid our farewell."

Madam Wei smiled faintly, "You two sirs must leave now? I will not see you out." Surprisingly, she did not seem to have thoughts of trying to stop them and merely watched as they walked out.

They had just stepped out of the inn when Guo DaLu could contain himself no longer and blurted, "I really admire you. You have a true skill."

Yan Qi: "What skill is that?"

Guo DaLu: "Your untrue words sound exactly the same as if you were speaking ones that were true."

Glaring at him, Yan Qi retorted, "I really admire you too."

Guo DaLu: "What do you admire about me?"

Yan Qi's tone was icy as he answered, "There are not many people out there like you. The instant you see a woman, you will immediately forget your own birth date and eight characters [* used for astrological/horoscope purposes], and you will itch to recite your entire family tree to her."

Guo DaLu laughed and protested, "That is only because I saw that she does not look like a bad person."

Yan Qi smirked, "Do bad people have signs hanging on their faces?"

Guo DaLu: "If she had bad intentions, why would she let us walk out the door as we pleased?"

Laughing coldly, Yan Qi said, "What could she do if she didn't let us leave? Do you think she has the ability to make us stay?"

Guo DaLu sighed, "If you think that she is just an ordinary woman, then you are wrong."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "She seemed to know very clearly our every move, every action. Based on this point alone, I can conclude that she undoubtedly is not an ordinary woman."

Yan Qi: "What things did she know?"

Guo DaLu: "She knew that we are not locals here, that we were hiding in the tree..." All of a sudden, his voice broke off. He whispered, "Take a look at the pharmacy behind us."

Yan Qi: "I don't need to look."

Guo DaLu: "You noticed, too, that someone is watching us?"

Yan Qi's smile was cold as he nodded in response.

They had turned into a rather isolated street. The shops on this street closed relatively early, and there had been no one walking down it for a long time. The pharmacy had closed shop for the night long ago, yet standing behind a column in front of the doorway, frequently sticking out half a face to steal glances at them, was a slight and short figure dressed in black.

Guo DaLu: "Has this person been following behind us the whole time?"

Yan Qi: "I was aware of him the instant we stepped out of the inn. That's why I purposely turned onto this street." He gave a sarcastic smile and added, "Now you know why Madam Wei let us go so easily."

Guo DaLu: "Could it be that she already knew that we have been with Lin TaiPing, and she intentionally let us go, then told someone to follow us?"

Yan Qi: "Mm."

Guo DaLu exhaled a long breath. "Her calculations were not bad, but it's a pity she underestimated us just a little bit."

Yan Qi: "Did you think she views you as an amazing person?"

Guo DaLu: "I may not have any amazing points, but if someone wants to shadow me, it will not be easy for him."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu gave a wink and grinned, "People who want to follow me will at least have to take in some northwest wind."

On that street, there was only one shop that had not closed for the day. Regardless of what street you may be on, the last store to close will always be a restaurant or tavern. Yan Qi could not help bursting out in laughter as he teased, "I think it is not because you want to treat this person to a drink of northwest wind but rather, it is because you want to drink some wine."

Guo DaLu chortled, "I drink wine, he drinks northwest wind. Either way, we both get to drink."

Guo DaLu had a shortcoming when it came to drinking: if he did not drink until he was dead drunk like a pile of mud, he absolutely would not leave; if he did not drink until his wallet was emptied, he also definitely would not go. But if there was only one person in this world who could cure him of this illness, then that person would be Yan Qi. The gold necklace had been pawned for fifty liang.

Half of that had been given to Wang Dong. This time, Guo DaLu did not take his half and drink it all away. As a matter of fact, when he walked out of the little tavern, he was relatively clear-headed and his vision was good enough that he could still see people.

Sure enough, the figure in black was still standing behind that column in front of the pharmacy, drinking his northwest wind. Guo DaLu exhaled loudly and joked, "I should let him take in a bit more. He doesn't seem to have had enough to drink."

Yan Qi reminded him disapprovingly, "But you have had enough. If you had kept going, even a three year old child could tail you."

Guo DaLu scowled at him. "Who said? He still would have no hope of catching up to me, even if I used only one leg to run, Do you believe it?"

Yan Qi: "There's only one thing that I believe."

Guo DaLu: "What is that?"

Yan Qi: "Even if he can catch up to you, you can still blow him away."

Guo DaLu: "Blow him away? How would I blow?"

Yan Qi: "The same way as how you 'blow bull' [*(slang) brag; blow your own horn]."

Guo DaLu did not say anything. He suddenly lifted up one leg and took a leap forward. In that single leap, he had actually been able to jump two zhang [* 1 zhang = 3 1/3 metres].

With a long sigh, Yan Qi shook his head and muttered, "Why is it that he always acts as if he will never grow up?"

The sky was black; the road was white. In reality, the road was not white. What was white was the snow that had accumulated on it.

Guo DaLu looked on both sides of him at the two rows of snow-covered, leafless trees running speedily backwards, as if they were flying. The trees, in actual fact, were not running. He was the one who was running, using his two legs.

He was not worried that he could not lose the black-clothed figure behind him; rather, he was concerned that he would not be able to catch up to Yan Qi. When Yan Qi put his lightness kung fu to use, he really seemed like he had transformed into a swallow.

Guo DaLu was starting to breathe heavily. Only now did Yan Qi gradually start to slow down. Glancing at Guo DaLu from the corner of his eye, he grinned and taunted, "You can't take it anymore?"

Guo DaLu blew out a lengthy breath. With a sour smile on his face, he wheezed, "I eat more than you and my body size is bigger than yours. Of course I cannot outrun you." Yan Qi could devour his food ferociously when he was eating and his body size was not small either, yet he was still able to run swiftly. Guo DaLu defended, "I'm not a horse. I only have two legs."

Laughing at him, Yan Qi pointed out, "Didn't you say that even if you only used one leg, other people would still have no hope of catching up to you?"

Guo DaLu: "I was not talking about you."

Yan Qi's eyes were twinkling. "But you think other people cannot?"

Guo Dalu: "Obviously."

Out of the blue, Yan Qi gave a sigh as he advised, "Why don't you turn your head and take a look?"

As Guo DaLu looked back, he was astounded. He had suddenly discovered that there was someone else on the road. The road was white; the person was black. The black-clothed figure that had been hiding behind the column in front of the pharmacy just a little while ago had, to his surprise, hounded them all the way here. Guo DaLu was seized with shock for a long while. Finally, he commented, "I never would have believed that this fellow could run so fast, too."

Yan Qi: "Let's not even talk about if you used only one leg. It seems that even if you had three legs, he would still be able to catch up to you just the same. Do you believe it?"

Guo DaLu: "I believe it."

Yan Qi gazed at him, his eyes filled with laughter. Guo DaLu was a very lovable person indeed. The most lovable aspect about him was that he was willing to admit his own faults. As a result, regardless of how many faults he may have had, he was still a very lovable person.

Yan Qi: "Since we cannot shake him off, we won't be able to go back."

Guo DaLu: "That's right."

Yan Qi: "If we aren't going back, then where do we go?"

Guo DaLu: “No place to go.” Winking at him, Guo DaLu asked with a smile, “Do you remember what you had said yourself a moment ago?”

Yan Qi: “What did I say?”

Guo DaLu reminded him, “You said, even if he could catch up to us, I could blow him away.”

Yan Qi guffawed, “Do you really have such a great ability?”

Guo DaLu: “Of course.”

Yan Qi blinked and asked curiously, “What are you planning on using to blow him away?”

Guo DaLu: “My fist.”

He suddenly spun around and headed towards the person in black. The black-clothed figure stood in the middle of the road, eyes fixed on him. “This fellow is really staying patient.” Guo DaLu also stayed patient as he walked over unhurriedly. In his mind, he was calculating, should he move his mouth first or his fist?

Then unexpectedly, the figure in black lost his patience. With a turn of the head, the person dashed away. Immediately, Guo DaLu also lost his patience and, kicking up his feet, chased after him. He realized very quickly that this black-clothed figure’s lightness kung fu was not below Yan Qi’s. Even if he did grow a third leg, he still would not be able to catch up. All he could do was shout, “Friend, please wait a moment. I have something to say.”

The black-clothed figure suddenly whipped around and called mockingly, “You are right. I am extremely deaf. I cannot hear a single word that you say.” Apparently, the intention was to antagonize Guo DaLu. It was an easy feat

for anyone to anger Guo DaLu; he had always been one who was easily angered. And once he was upset, he resolved that he must catch up.

Initially, it had been the black-clothed figure chasing him, but now, he was pursuing the figure instead. Yan Qi had no choice but to accompany him on his chase.

Beside the road was a grove of barren trees covered in snow. From within the grove, lamplight could be seen. The black-clothed figure darted into the grove, then suddenly disappeared. The light still glowed. It was shining out from a house. The figure in black must have gone into that house.

Guo DaLu was grinding his teeth as he fumed, "You wait for me outside. I'm going in to take a look."

Yan Qi did not say anything, nor did he try to restrain him. If Guo DaLu had set his mind on doing a task, no one would be able to hold him back. Even if he wanted to throw himself into the river, Yan Qi would have no choice but to jump in with him.

Surprisingly, the door of this illuminated house was open. The light was shining out from the entrance as Guo DaLu rushed to the house. He had just reached the doorway when he suddenly stopped, stunned by what he saw. Inside, a fire was blazing. A person sat beside that fire. The fire was radiant; the person was beautiful.

Madam Wei.

She did not show any signs of surprise when she saw Guo DaLu. There was a faint smile on her lips as she spoke. "'It must be really chilly outside. Why don't you come in and warm up by the fire?'" It appeared that she had been awaiting their arrival.

Besides Madam Wei, there was someone else in the house: a black-clothed figure. The instant Guo DaLu saw this person, his anger started rising again. Unable to contain himself, he charged over and barked, "Why were you tailing us all this time?"

The black-clothed person blinked at him and countered, "Was it me tailing you? Or was it you tailing me?" Those eyes were startlingly bright.

Guo DaLu snapped, "Of course it was you tailing me."

The black-clothed person laughed. "Do you know what place this is?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Black-clothed person: "Well then, let me tell you. This is my home."

Guo DaLu: "Your home?"

The black-clothed person laughed again as he questioned, "If it really was me tailing you, how is it that I tailed you back to my own home?"

Guo DaLu paused again. He suddenly realized that, not only did the eyes sparkle brightly, the smile of this individual was also very sweet. This black-clothed person was actually a girl dressed in black clothing. In addition, she was at most only sixteen or seventeen years old. Guo DaLu may have had lots of excuses and reasons to argue with her, but he was not able to make himself say any of them.

Madam Wei offered, "Since you two sirs have already arrived here, then please sit. Please sit." There were two chairs

beside the fire.

Yan Qi took a seat. He suddenly gave a smile as he remarked, "You seem to have known beforehand that we would be coming and have been waiting for us."

Madam Wei responded with a smile also. "You wanted to leave; I could not hold you back. You wanted to come; I also could not stop you."

Yan Qi asked her, "And what if we want to leave now?"

Madam Wei answered, "I still would only have one sentence to say."

Yan Qi: "What sentence is that?"

Madam Wei: "I will not see you out."

Yan Qi: "But then, you would still send this little meimei [*younger sister] to tail us."

The black-clothed young girl glowered as she retorted, "Who was tailing you? If you are allowed to walk on that road, why can't I? You can come barging into my house as you please, so why can I not walk along the same road as you?"

Yan Qi gave a cold laugh. "So it was merely a coincidence that you were on the same road as us."

Black-clothed young girl: "Absolutely correct."

Yan Qi: "Then that truly is a huge coincidence."

With an unconcerned smile on her face, Madam Wei told him, "Wait until you are a little bit older. Then, you will realize that this world has always been filled with many coincidences."

Yan Qi: "From the look of things then, you have already set your mind on finding Lin TaiPing through us."

Madam Wei laughed and replied, "Well, that would depend on whether you really know where he is."

Yan Qi: "And if we do know?"

There was a faint smile on her face as Madam Wei answered, "As long as you know, then sooner or later, I will also know."

Turning towards Guo DaLu, Yan Qi suddenly winked and asked, "When a person's legs are tied up with rope, is it still possible for her to tail people?"

Guo DaLu: "It seems it would not be possible."

Yan Qi chuckled, "Correct answer." From his sleeve, a rope suddenly materialized and sped towards the black-clothed young girl's legs, winding around them. The rope was like a snake, swift and precise. It seemed as if it had grown eyes. Once the end of that rope left his hands, very few people could avoid it.

But the girl in black did not need to dodge because the rope was already in Madam Wei's hand. Her hand had reached out slowly. The rope's momentum had been very fast, yet for some reason, it had somehow ended up in her hand.

The expression on Yan Qi's face changed. Only he knew what had happened. All he had felt was a strange force transmitting through the rope, shaking him so hard that even now, half his body felt numb. He had never believed that there could be such terrifying internal energy in the world. Now he believed.

Madam Wei smiled coolly. "Even if you really do manage to tie up her two legs, it still would be useless."

Yan Qi was silent for a long time. He finally exhaled a long sigh and resigned, "It truly would be useless."

Madam Wei: "You should at least bind up my legs first."

Yan Qi: "That is right."

Madam Wei laughed as she declared, "However, I can guarantee that there is absolutely no one in this world who can bind my legs."

Yan Qi: "And I absolutely believe that." He suddenly snickered, "But, I also can guarantee something to you."

Madam Wei: "What is that?"

Yan Qi: "Though I may not be able to tie up your legs, I can bind up another person's legs. Once this person's legs are bound, even if you have abilities as great as the heavens, you still would have no hope of chasing out Lin TaiPing's location."

Madam Wei chortled, "And whose legs do you intend on binding?"

Yan Qi: "My own."

No matter how pathetic a person may be, at the very least, he should still be able to tie his own legs. This point was unquestionable.

Yan Qi secured his legs together. The ropes that he carried on him were not a small number. It seemed that he really liked using rope as a weapon.

Astonished, Madam Wei was still for a long while before she broke into an amused smile. "True. That truly is a good idea. Even I must admit that it is a smart plan."

Yan Qi: "You flatter me."

Madam Wei: "Should you really decide to tie yourself up here, then it is true that I cannot chase Lin TaiPing's whereabouts out of you."

Guo DaLu added, "I don't need to tie my own legs. His legs are equivalent to my legs."

Madam Wei: "In that case, you also have made up your mind not to leave."

Guo DaLu: "It seems like it."

Madam Wei: "I had a plan to bind both of you up with ropes and force you to tell me where Lin TaiPing is. If you did not tell me, I would not release you." Letting out a sigh, she smiled cynically and continued, "Who knew you would, in fact, decide to tie yourselves up?"

Guo DaLu smirked, "This is called, 'the first to make a move is the stronger.'"

Madam Wei: "It is a pity for you that the latter to make a move may not always meet with disaster. The ones who will end up meeting with disaster are still the two of you."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Madam Wei: "You cannot stay here for a lifetime."

Grinning, Guo DaLu argued, "You cannot say that for sure." Glancing around in all four directions, he noted, "This place is warm and comfortable. At the very least, it is more comfortable than the rundown house that we are living in."

Madam Wei's eyes flashed as she questioned sharply, "You live in a rundown house?"

Guo DaLu: "Don't bother trying to get us to leak information. There are many rundown houses in the world. If you want to search through them one by one, you'll be searching until you are in your coffin and you still will not have finished."

With another sigh, Madam Wei said, "I just find that it is a bit unusual."

Guo DaLu: "What do you think is unusual?"

Madam Wei: "Lin TaiPing has been pampered since childhood. How could he last in a rundown house?"

Guo DaLu: "Because our rundown house has something in it that cannot be found elsewhere."

Madam Wei: "What do you have in your place?"

Guo DaLu: "Friends." So long as there were friends there, even a poorer or more rundown house would not bother them. This was because where there are friends, there is warmth and joy. In their eyes, if a place did not have friends, even if the floor was littered with piles of gold, it would still only be a prison constructed of gold.

Madam Wei was silent for a long time until, at last, she exhaled lightly, "Though you may be somewhat strange, you appear to be people who are true friends."

Guo DaLu: "We, at least, would never betray our friend."

Madam Wei inquired, "Regardless of how long you will have to stay here, you will never betray your friend?"

Guo DaLu nodded resolutely.

Madam Wei smiled again. In an indifferent tone, she stated, "Fine. I would like to see how long you are willing to wait."

End of Chapter 18

Chapter 19 - A Hell of Darkness

Daybreak.

The table was laden with many different dian xin [* dim sum, smaller snack-sized foods] and each one was delicious.

Eating is not only a type of enjoyment, it is also an art. Madam Wei appreciated both the enjoyment and the art. When she ate, she did it slowly and attractively. No matter what it was she was eating, she was able to make others feel that she was indulging in something extremely delectable. Besides, these dian xin were, indeed, all scrumptious. And since their flavors were so delightful when eaten, their aromas definitely were also mouthwatering when they were inhaled.

Guo DaLu could not help himself as he started to swallow his own saliva hungrily while trying to not be seen. As the tipsy effect of the alcohol faded, his belly seemed to feel famished especially quickly. The feeling you have when watching someone eat and drink extravagantly while your stomach is starving is worse than any possible punishment.

Guo DaLu suddenly cried out, “The host is pigging out by herself while she makes the guests sit hungrily off to the side watching her. That does not seem the proper way to treat the guests.”

Madam Wei nodded in agreement. “That truly is not the proper way to treat guests.” She then countered, “But are you my guests?”

Guo DaLu mulled over that for a bit. Finally, he sighed and with a wry smile, admitted, “No.”

Madam Wei: "Would you like to be my guests?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Madam Wei: "For what reason? For Lin TaiPing?"

Guo DaLu breathed another long sigh of regret and lamented, "Alas, he is our friend! "

Madam Wei: "You may indeed be loyal friends, but you are also fools."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Madam Wei: "Up until this point, you still have not asked me why I am looking for Lin TaiPing."

Guo DaLu: "There is no need to ask."

Madam Wei: "Why is that? Do you know whether my intentions are good or malicious? Perhaps the reason I am looking for him is just to give him some gifts."

Guo DaLu: "I only need to know one thing: if he does not want to see you, then we must not let you find him. It makes no difference whether your intentions are kind or malicious."

Madam Wei: "How do you know that he is not willing to see me?"

Guo DaLu: "Because you are too anxious about finding him. It seems too much like you are harboring evil intentions. Otherwise, you should just let us go back to inform him and then tell him to come see you."

Madam Wei laughed, "Apparently you are not too foolish – just a little bit."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Madam Wei: "You may be concerned that I will pursue you in the shadows, but all that you need to do is not return home. You could still go to other places. Why would you need to tie yourself up here?"

Guo DaLu considered what she said, then looked over at Yan Qi. "What she said seems to be quite logical. Why are we not going yet?"

Madam Wei: "Because I am no longer letting you leave."

Guo DaLu protested, "You had said yourself that we could leave at any time we wished."

Madam Wei: "I have changed my mind." She gave a little laugh and added, "You know that women can change their minds at any time."

Guo DaLu groaned, "Wouldn't it be nice if you were not a woman?"

Madam Wei: "What would be nice about it?"

Guo DaLu's eyes were fixed upon the shao mai dumplings and steamed dumplings that were in front of her. "If you were a man, we could at least be thick-skinned and seize the food from you by force."

A faint smile showed on her face as she challenged, "Why don't you treat me as a man and give it a try?"

Guo DaLu's eyes glanced over at Yan Qi. Yan Qi blinked.

Madam Wei goaded them again, "The two of you might as well come over together and try and steal it from me."

Yan Qi snorted, "The skin on my face is not as thick as his. I will let him fight himself."

Guo DaLu gave a sad sigh. "When a person is at a point of extreme hunger, he will have no choice but to be a little thick-skinned." Unexpectedly, his body suddenly flew upwards and he threw himself at that table that was covered in dian xin. His ten fingers spread, curving menacingly like the talons of an eagle. He was using an extremely powerful stance of the Eagle Talon Skill called "Flying Eagle Catches the Rabbit."

To use a move like "Flying Eagle Catches the Rabbit" to snatch steamed dumplings seemed rather ridiculous, but when someone has reached utmost starvation, he is willing to do things that are even more ridiculous.

Madam Wei complimented him, "Your Eagle Talon Skill is pretty good." As her lips spoke these words in an indifferent tone, the chopsticks in her hand lightly stabbed forward. She was using chopsticks made of jadeite. Ordinarily, chopsticks such as these would break with just a little bump. The tips touched Guo DaLu's middle finger lightly. The chopsticks did not snap.

However, Guo DaLu's body looked like it had snapped as he abruptly came plummeting down from midair. It appeared as if he would crash onto the dian xin-covered table. Madam Wei's chopsticks unexpectedly changed direction and clamped onto his waistband as his entire body weight bore down on that pair of chopsticks that would snap with even a light bump. The chopsticks still did not snap. Madam Wei's hand hung in air, using those chopsticks to hold him up like he was a dried shrimp.

Yan Qi could only gawk in amazement.

A small smile was seen on Madam Wei's lips as she said, "Such a large dumpling should be enough for you to eat."

Before she had completed her sentence, Guo DaLu's body was sent soaring in Yan Qi's direction. Yan Qi tried to catch him but could not. Their two bodies collided, and they were both sent tumbling to the ground.

A long time passed, yet Guo DaLu still could not climb back up onto his feet. With wide eyes, he stared at Madam Wei. It seemed like he was dumbstruck.

Yan Qi spoke up, "Do you know the name of the martial art for the move she just used?"

Guo DaLu shook his head.

Yan Qi: "Since you know the Eagle Talon Skill, then you should also know that there is one stance in it called 'Old Eagle Snatches the Chicken.' "

Guo DaLu's head nodded.

Laughing, Yan Qi told him, "This move of hers is a variation of 'Old Eagle Snatches the Chicken' and is called 'Chopsticks Clamp the Chicken.' "

With a sigh, Guo DaLu complained, "So am I a chicken or a dumpling?"

Yan Qi: "A dumpling with chicken meat filling."

Guo DaLu let out a little chuckle as well. "I did not realize that you knew so many things."

All of a sudden, his body was darting forward like an arrow. This time, he did not reach for the tabletop and instead, scurried under the table.

Madam Wei had been listening to their dialogue with a smile on her face, as if what she was hearing was very

entertaining. She had not anticipated that he would suddenly rush over while he was still speaking, and even more so, had not expected him to dash under the table. There was no dian xin under the table. Why would he dart under there? Did he want to pick up some bones? But dumplings do not have bones. Madam Wei could not help feeling slightly puzzled.

Then, out of the blue, the dian xin on the table leapt into midair. With the palm of his hand, Guo DaLu had hit the bottom of the table, sending the dian xin seven, eight feet up into the air. Yan Qi gave a flick of his hand, and the rope that had been tied around his legs suddenly went flying outwards like a rainbow. In one quick coil like a serpent, seven or eight different types of dian xin were swept away by the rope. Guo DaLu had already darted out from under the table.

As Yan Qi loosened his grip, three or four dian xin toppled down. Stretching out his hand, Guo DaLu caught two or three of them. At the same time, his jaws opened wide so that a tender shao mai dumpling made of glutinous rice fell square into his mouth.

These few moves they had just used were not any remarkable martial art, but the coordination was so tight and masterful that it took one's breath away to watch. Surprisingly, Madam Wei gave a regretful sigh and conceded, "After watching your display of martial arts, even if I let you eat some food, it was still worth it."

In two or three bites, Guo DaLu had swallowed the shao mai. Grinning, he said, "All things considered, this person still has a bit of her conscience."

As he started to gobble his second shao mai, Yan Qi had already devoured a baozi [*stuffed bun]. It had not been an

easy feat to eat it, and so each little bit of flavor in his mouth seemed to be especially tasty. With a wide smile, he asked, "This baozi is really delicious. May I ask what was used as its filling?"

Madam Wei smiled in return. "There were two types of fillings for the shao mai and baozi."

Guo DaLu: "Which two?"

Madam Wei: "One of them is dried shrimp with fresh meat."

Guo DaLu: "And what is the other meat filling?"

Madam Wei: "Rat meat. Poisoned rat meat."

Normally, meat from a rat was edible; however, consuming the meat from a poisoned rat could take a person's life. The shao mai that Guo DaLu had just swallowed seemed to have gotten stuck at the top of throat and would not go down. He had wanted to ask which filling had been in the shao mai he had just eaten, but now, that was not necessary. His four limbs suddenly felt limp and his head grew dizzy. Looking over, he saw that Yan Qi's face had become an ashen color and furthermore, was slowly turning black.

Madam Wei was still smiling.

Just when Guo DaLu was about to march over to her, she suddenly seemed to him to shift to a location far, far away. Her face was becoming increasingly blurry until gradually, he could see it no longer. All he could sense was Yan Qi rushing over and embracing him as he whispered in his ear, "Before I die, I have a secret that I must tell you."

Guo DaLu asked shakily, "What... what secret?"

Yan Qi: "I..." He had not finished revealing his secret before he collapsed to the ground. But even if he had finished, Guo

DaLu would not have heard anything.

“Humans will die for riches; birds will perish for food.”

This saying is not very correct. Some people do not care about money and valuables and would certainly not risk their lives for these, but yet, oftentimes, they will die for good food. Are you thinking that it is a real waste to die for that reason? Wait until you are weak and dizzy from starvation; perhaps you, too, would think that you would rather die.

But why were they suffering from hunger? Friendship. Of course, this was all for their friend. “Those who die for their friends will certainly not go to hell.” However, if their friends were in hell already, it could be that they would rather join them there than go to heaven.

Since time immemorial, the only hardship is death. Indeed, death can be considered as the most terrifying thing. It means that you are finished, you have completely faded away. From this point on, there is no hope. Your physical body will rapidly decay. Your name will also very quickly be forgotten by people.

What else in this world could be more frightening than death? If, after you die, you must go down to hell, then this definitely would be even more frightening. But what is hell really like? No one knows. Presumably, it would be very dark, dreadfully dark...

Darkness. So dark that, not only could you not see other people, you also could not see yourself.

Guo DaLu could not see himself. All he could sense was that his eyes were open. But what type of place was he in? Did it

exist? He did not know at all.

To “not know,” is a fear in itself – perhaps it is the greatest fear of all humanity. People fear death for the very reason that that they do not know what it is like to be dead.

Guo DaLu could not help feeling frightened. He was so scared that he was nearly immobilized. Fear is something that mankind will never be able to conquer. A long time passed before Guo DaLu became aware that there seemed to be the sound of breathing next to him.

But he could not be certain if it was a human breathing. In such deep darkness, it was impossible for anyone to have faith in his own judgment.

Fortunately, he still had faith in one thing: since Yan Qi had been with him when he was alive, even if he was dead, Yan Qi would still stay with him. There are some friends that, in life or death, will never be separated. So Guo DaLu gathered his courage and asked, “Yan Qi... is that you?”

Another long while went by before a feeble voice was heard from within the dark saying, “Is it Xiao Guo [Little Guo]?” At last, Guo DaLu could breathe a sigh of relief. As long as he had friends by his side, life or death did not matter.

Guo DaLu: “Is this your hand?”

The hand gave a little twitch, then immediately gripped tightly onto Guo DaLu’s hand. Yan Qi’s voice said weakly, “What place is this?”

Guo DaLu: “I don’t know.”

Yan Qi: “Are we still alive?”

Sighing, Guo DaLu answered, “I don’t know.”

Yan Qi also sighed. "So it seems, when you were alive, you were a muddleheaded person; now that you are dead, you are a muddleheaded ghost."

Guo DaLu laughed in response. His voice full of mirth, he countered, "And it seems, alive, you had to mock me; dead, you still have to mock me."

Yan Qi did not speak, and instead, grasped Guo DaLu's hand even tighter. He normally was a very strong person, yet now, he suddenly seemed to become dependent on Guo DaLu. Perhaps he had always relied on Guo DaLu but had forced himself to keep that dependency in check. Only in times of real fear will a person's true feelings surface.

Guo DaLu was silent for a long period. He suddenly spoke, "Can you guess what I most want to know right now?"

Yan Qi: "You want to know where this place is?"

Guo DaLu: "Incorrect."

Yan Qi: "You want to know whether we are still alive?"

Guo DaLu: "Also incorrect."

Yan Qi groaned, "I am not in the mood, at the moment, to guess what is on your mind. Just say it out yourself."

End of Chapter 19

Chapter 20 - Death: The Sole Hardship Through All the Ages

Guo DaLu told him, "What I most want to know is your secret."

Yan Qi: "Me?... What secret would I have?"

Guo DaLu pressed, "The secret you wanted to tell me before you died."

Abruptly, Yan Qi pulled his hand back and did not say anything. After a long while, with a hint of laughter in his voice, he finally responded, "You still have not forgotten about that?"

Guo DaLu chuckled, "In life or in death, I will not forget."

Yan Qi was quiet for a long time again before answering in a low tone, "But I do not want to tell it to you anymore."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "No real reason. It's just because... just because..."

Before he could finish his thought, in that boundless darkness in front of them, an eerie green phosphorus flame suddenly glowed. Ghost light! A shadowy figure seemed to materialize under that terrible greenish light. Perhaps it wasn't a human shadow but a ghost's shadow. It appeared to flutter as it stayed in that spot, as if it could neither touch the sky above or the ground below.

Guo DaLu blurted out in a loud cry, "Are you a human or a ghost?"

There was no answer. This shadow, still unknown whether it was human or ghost, all of a sudden drifted away from them. Regardless of whether it was a human or a ghost, it was still the only speck of light in that endless blackness. And as long as there was a bit of light, it was better than being in the dark.

Guo DaLu whispered in a hoarse tone, "Can you walk?"

Yan Qi: "Yes."

Guo DaLu: "Let's follow it, okay?"

Yan Qi sighed, "In any case, it cannot be any worse than our current situation."

The ghost light was hovering in front, as if it was intentionally waiting for them. Guo DaLu found Yan Qi's hand and clutched it firmly once again. "Hold on to me. You must not let go. Good or bad, we will be together." They had not yet recovered their strength, and their bodies still felt a little numb, but in spite of this, they still managed to rise to their feet and follow the ghost light as it moved forward.

But what was up ahead? Was it heaven? Or hell? They did not know, nor did they care because they were at least able to walk together, hand in hand, to whatever lay ahead.

As they gradually recovered and were able to move faster, the ghost light in front of them also picked up its speed. Unexpectedly, like a shooting star, it gave a flash and then disappeared. All around, it was flooded with pitch blackness again. No light, no sound. All they could hear was the beating of their hearts. They were beating rapidly. Each of them could only sense the beating of his own heart. It was beating rapidly. They could both feel that the other's palm was clammy.

Guo DaLu reassured, "You do not need to be frightened. If we really are dead already, what do we have to fear? And if we are not dead yet, then there is even less reason to be afraid." When a person tells another to not be scared, in his heart, he, himself, is actually terribly scared.

Yan Qi: "Should we keep moving forward or should we turn back?"

Guo DaLu: "Are we ones to turn back?"

Yan Qi: "Alright. Good or bad, then, let us first charge ahead before we talk about it." Their grip on each other's hand grew even tighter as they forged onward with large steps.

Out of nowhere, a voice shouted, "Halt! " As the cry resonated, seven, eight spots of ghost light suddenly flashed alight in the darkness. Ominous looking flames floated in midair.

They could see that in front of them was a massive desk. On it was a brush [for writing] pot and a stack of notebooks. Were they books or ledgers? A person was sitting behind the desk, flipping through one of the notebooks. They could not see this person's facial features. They could only vaguely make out that he seemed to have a very long beard, and on his head he wore a crown like those of ancient times.

The ghostly shadow they had been following a moment ago was beside the desk. It still hung there, neither touching the sky nor the ground. In its hand, it seemed to be holding a very large wood tablet. Could that be the Tablet for Arresting Souls? Could this be Shen Luo Dian¹¹? Was that Yama [*judge of the dead] sitting there? They did not know. Neither of them had been to Shen Luo Dian before, and neither of them had seen Yama. They could sense, though, a sinister, ghostly air that sent chills up their spines.

The Yama sitting before them spoke unexpectedly. The voice was chilling and carried an eerie air also. "The pre-destined lifespan of these two people have not come to an end yet. Why is it that they are here?"

The ghost shadow answered, "Because they have committed a crime."

Yama: "What crime have they committed?"

Ghost shadow: "The crime of gluttony."

Yama: "What is the seriousness of their crimes?"

Ghost shadow: "A gluttonous man, without a doubt, is a thief; a gluttonous woman is unquestionably a prostitute. The crime of gluttony, therefore, belongs in the seventh level of Hell, where for all eternity, they will not be allowed to eat until satiated."

Guo DaLu suddenly yelled out, "Lying is an even greater crime and belongs in the Hell where tongues are yanked out..."

Yama palm came crashing down on the desk surface. "How dare you be so audacious in this place!"

Guo DaLu retorted, "You can be a human or you can be a ghost, but regardless, if you have wronged me, then I am left with no choice but to be audacious!"

Yama: "How have I wronged you?"

Guo DaLu snapped back loudly, "If you really are Yama, then you should know."

Yan Qi unexpectedly exclaimed, "You at least should know one thing."

Yama: "What is that?"

Yan Qi: "You can be the real Yama or you can be a fake one, but regardless, do not bother thinking that any information regarding Lin TaiPing's whereabouts will be divulged from our mouths."

As he declared this, Yama seemed to be slightly taken aback. Several moments passed before he stated ominously, "Even if I am a phony Yama, you are still truly dead."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

With a chilling laugh, Yama said, "You have already come here. Do you think that you will be able to go back alive?"

Yan Qi: "Whether we think that we can live is one matter, whether we will tell you anything is a different matter."

Yama roared at him, "Would you rather die than say anything?"

Yan Qi: "We will not tell you means that we will not tell you."

Yama gave a cold smirk. "Fine!" As this one word left his lips, all the flames suddenly disappeared, and all around them was a sheet of darkness once again.

Holding onto Yan Qi, Guo DaLu darted forward. At the same time, they both rushed ahead, and at the same time, they both crashed to the floor.

The desk in front of them was gone. Yama was gone. The ghost minions were gone as well. Aside from darkness, there was nothing. There were only two people. And these two people were either extremely smart or else extremely foolish. To the left was a stone wall. To the right was a stone

wall. To the front was a stone wall. To the back was also a stone wall. Stone walls that were stronger than iron. They had finally realized that this place had transformed into a stone barrel. And so, they decided they might as well sit down.

After a long time, Guo DaLu let out a surprising chuckle. "You also noticed that that Yama was a phony?"

Yan Qi: "That Yama had to have been Madam Wei."

Guo DaLu: "But Madam Wei does not have a beard."

Yan Qi: "The beard was fake too. Everything was fake."

Guo DaLu threw back his head and guffawed, "That person really is quite ludicrous. She actually thought up such an idiotic plan to try and fool us."

Giggling, Yan Wi agreed, "Extremely ludicrous indeed."

Though they were laughing, the sound of their laughter was not pleasant to listen to and was even worse than the sound of crying. This was because the whole situation was not ludicrous, not even the least bit, and the plan was not idiotic.

If you had eaten a poisoned baozi, felt your limbs suddenly grow weak, watched as your friend's face started turning black, collapsed unconscious, and then, when you came to, discovered that you were in a place such as this one, saw a ghostly shadow drifting above the ground, and even saw a long-bearded Yama wearing an ancient crown, would you think it was ludicrous?

Guo DaLu could no longer make himself laugh and moaned, "What she did may be ludicrous, but what she said is not."

Yan Qi: "What did she say?"

Guo DaLu: "Yama may have been a phony, but we are no different from dead right now."

Yan Qi: "Are you afraid of dying?"

With a sigh, Guo DaLu confessed, "I am indeed a little scared."

All of a sudden, the flicker of a flame was seen, and it illuminated a large mound of bright yellow objects that shimmered with a golden light. Gold. Very few people in the world would ever have an opportunity to see so much gold. From the dark, a menacing voice rung out, "So long as you tell me, not only will I immediately release you, all this gold will also be yours."

Guo DaLu jumped to his feet and cried defiantly, "Not telling, not telling, not telling!" A sigh echoed out from the blackness. Then, nothing was visible, nothing was audible.

Another long while passed before Yan Qi spoke up. "Actually, you are not afraid of dying."

Guo DaLu heaved a sigh. "No, I'm not. But... we are going to die for Lin TaiPing, yet he does not even know and may never know."

Yan Qi: "Whatever you do for your friends, that is your own business. You should not need your friends to know."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "I had been worried you would think that dying for this reason was not worthwhile. Who knew that you actually deserve to be called a true friend more than I do?"

Yan Qi was quiet for a long moment before sighing unexpectedly. "Perhaps it is not because I am a true friend, but rather, it is simply because I have thought through this thoroughly." He explained, "In order to find Lin TaiPing, she will not hesitate to sacrifice anything at any cost."

Guo DaLu: "It seems so."

Yan Qi: "If she does not hold a deep enmity toward Lin TaiPing, why would she be willing to make such a sacrifice?"

Guo DaLu: "What I find odd is, Lin TaiPing is just a young boy. How can such an enmity exist between him and individual like her?"

Yan Qi: "This deep-seated hatred must have taken root in the previous generation. She wants to exterminate both the root and the branch and therefore, must kill Lin TaiPing too."

Guo DaLu: "That makes sense."

Yan Qi: "Since she knows that we are Lin TaiPing's friends, of course she will not let us go. As a result, even if we disclose to her Lin TaiPing's location, we still must die and possibly, we would end up dying even faster."

Exhaling a lengthy sigh, Guo DaLu smiled bitterly and said, "Now that you have reminded me of all that, I feel that I am actually not as good a friend as I have claimed to be."

Yan Qi: "You had actually considered these points too?"

Guo DaLu: "If you had not reminded me, I would have forgotten."

Yan Qi: "How could you forget?"

Guo DaLu: "If you deliberately avoid thinking about something, is that not equivalent to forgetting it?"

Yan Qi: "But why would you deliberately avoid thinking about it?"

Guo DaLu: "Because, that way, I can believe that I really am a true friend. When I die, I will be able to think that I am a bit nobler than other people.

Yan Qi chortled, but there was a trace of misery in the sounds of his giggles. After a lengthy period of time, he said hesitantly, "You actually have always been a little nobler than other people."

It seemed that Guo DaLu wanted to hop to his feet. "I'm noble? You think that I'm noble?"

Yan Qi: "Nobody is born a hero. Heroism is usually forced upon people. Everyone understands this principle, yet people still cannot help fooling themselves. Only you..." He let out a light sigh, then continued slowly, "You not only are willing to admit this, you also dare to say it out loud."

Guo DaLu: "This... this could be because I am more thick-skinned than most people."

Yan Qi: "This definitely is not being thick-skinned. It is..."

Guo DaLu: "Is what?"

Yan Qi: "Courage! This is courage. Very few people have this courage."

Laughing, Guo DaLu remarked, "I never thought there would be a time when you would praise me. Are you purposely trying to comfort me so I will feel a little better?"

Yan Qi did not respond and only grasped his hand tightly. That ice-cold hand seemed to have gradually gotten warmer. Another long while passed before Guo DaLu broke the silence. He spoke slowly as he told Yan Qi, "We have actually not known each other for a very long time, but I always felt that you are the best friend I have ever had in my life. Wang Dong is also my best friend, yet the feelings I have for you are different from what I feel about him."

In a hushed tone, Yan Qi asked, "How are they different?"

Guo DaLu: "I cannot tell you how they're different. It's just... it's just... If Wang Dong did something that wronged me, I would forgive him without any hesitation. But if you wronged me, I would be livid." These feelings truly were difficult to fathom. It was no wonder that he could not explain them with words.

The tips of Yan Qi's fingers seemed to be trembling, as if he was overcome with emotion. It was unfortunate that Guo DaLu could not see the expression on his face; otherwise he might have realized a lot of things. But not knowing was a good thing also. That blurry, indiscernible feeling was in some ways even more beautiful, more wondrous. It was a pity that they did not have much time remaining to relish in that feeling.

Yan Qi suddenly spoke in a tentative tone, "I still would like to know one thing, but I'm not sure whether I should ask."

Guo DaLu: "Ask. No matter what the words may be, you can say anything to me."

Yan Qi: "Supposing that Madam Wei really was willing to release us and was really going to give us all that gold, would you then reveal Lin TaiPing's location to her?"

Guo DaLu did not answer his question directly. Speaking each word deliberately, he responded, "I only know that gold one day will be spent and each person one day will be met by death. But friendship and morals will forever be present." He gave a little laugh before carrying on, "It is because these things still exist in this world that man can be considered different from other animals."

Yan Qi breathed a long, sad sigh. "I seem to rarely hear you say words like these. From morning to night, you always wear a cheeky grin on your face. I never thought that you knew how to say such a principle."

Guo DaLu: "Some principles need not be uttered from the lips."

Yan Qi: "But if you don't say them, how can anyone know what kind of person you are?"

Guo DaLu: "I don't need anyone else to know. As long as my friends know, as long as you know, then that is sufficient." With a giggle, he said, "And now, I also have something that I would really like to know."

Yan Qi: "Is it that secret that I still have not told to you?"

Guo DaLu: "Correct answer."

Yan Qi: "You... you still have not forgotten about it?"

Guo DaLu chuckled, "I already told you: in life or in death, I will not forget it."

For a long moment, Yan Qi was silent. Finally, he responded softly, "There have actually been many times when I wanted to reveal this secret, but I was scared that, the instant I said it out, I would regret it."

Guo DaLu inquired, "Why would you regret it?"

Yan Qi quavered, "Because... because I am scared that once you know, you will not be my friend."

Squeezing Yan Qi's hand, Guo DaLu assured him, "Don't worry. No matter what type of person you are, no matter what you have done in the past, I will always be your friend."

Yan Qi: "Honest?"

In a loud voice, Guo DaLu started to swear, "Should I have spoken even half a sentence that was untruthful, may I suffer a terrible..."

Before the word, "death" could slip off his lips, Yan Qi had already covered his mouth and said gently, "Alright. I will tell you. I am actually a..."

Before the word, "death" could slip off his lips, Yan Qi had already covered his mouth and said gently, "Alright. I will tell you. I am actually a..."

Suddenly, another bright spot glowed out of the darkness and cast light upon a very strange object. It looked like an iron tube, black and about as thick as a large bowl, supported on a wooden rack.

And then, Madam Wei's voice resonated, "Do you recognize what that is?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope."

Madam Wei cackled, "So it seems you are not only stubborn but ignorant as well." This sentence had just finished when, all of a sudden, the roar of an explosion was emitted from the iron tube, so loud it seemed as if the heavens were

collapsing and the earth was cracking. Guo DaLu's ears felt like they were fast becoming deaf from the quaking boom.

It seemed like half a day had passed before they could open their eyes again. In all directions, all they could see was a smoky haze. A large opening had been smashed into the stone wall opposite of the iron tube. Madam Wei's voice was heard again. "You should know now what that is."

Guo DaLu exhaled a long, shaky breath and asked, "Is that possibly a cannon?"

Madam Wei laughed and replied, "You have finally gotten a little smarter." The cannon was moving and it turned so that its mouth was pointed directly at Guo DaLu and Yan Qi. "Would you like a taste of this cannon's strength?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope." Madam Wei: "Then hurry and tell me.."

Guo DaLu: "No." Madam Wei: "Perhaps you do not yet know how powerful a cannon like this is."

Guo DaLu: "I know." Madam Wei: "What do you know?"

Guo DaLu: "I have heard that such cannons are used to besiege cities, and no matter how solid a city wall may be, it still will not be able to withstand the attack."

In amusement, Madam Wei challenged, "And if a city wall cannot stop it, don't tell me you think you can."

To her surprise, Guo DaLu doubled over in laughter. "Now you are the one who doesn't understand. My skin is much thicker than a city wall."

Enraged, she bellowed at him, "You really are not going to divulge anything to me?"

Guo DaLu did not even seem to want to bother putting in the effort to reply. He turned his head and looked intently at Yan Qi. Yan Qi's gaze was like water, soft and tender, but his voice was hard as steel as he stated resolutely, "Counting yesterday's incident, I have already died eight times, so what is the big deal in dying a ninth time?" "Death" itself has always been the most difficult and terrifying thing, yet when he spoke about it, he seemed very at ease with it.

Guo DaLu gave a sudden sigh and grasped Yan Qi's hand. "I still have one regret that remains."

Yan Qi's tone was gentle as he reassured, "I know, but in life or in death, I will make sure I tell you what it is."

His face brightening when he heard this, Guo DaLu declared with a wide smile, "If that is the case, what else is there in this life that I cannot let go of?"

Madam Wei smirked coldly, "Fine. Then go die."

The mouth of the cannon was aimed at Guo DaLu and Yan Qi. "Bang!" Another thunderous blast resounded, like the heavens were crumbling and the earth was shattering. As the dust cleared, two people could be seen, crumpled together in a pile on the ground...

Some people say death is very difficult. Others say it is very easy. What do you say?

End of Chapter 20

Chapter 21 - Shaded Willows, Bright Flowers¹²

To Yan Qi, dying really was quite easy. He had already died nine times. And now, surprisingly, he was alive again.

He could feel that he was lying on a soft and comfortable bed. Every item that his eyes took in was resplendent and exquisite, so much so that they did not seem to be earthly objects. If last time, the place he had awoken in was hell, then this place surely was heaven.

But without Guo DaLu by his side, what meaning could heaven possibly have to him? Where was Guo DaLu? Could he have been sent down to hell instead? Yan Qi struggled to pull himself up and at once, he saw Guo DaLu. He nearly could not believe his own eyes. In the room, there was a table, and it was covered in food and wine. Guo DaLu was sitting there feasting away.

Finally setting down his chopsticks when he saw Yan Qi, he beamed, "I saw that you were sleeping so well and did not want to disturb you, so I decided to indulge first. Fortunately, there is so much food here that even ten people would not be able to finish it all."

Yan Qi: "Did you bring me here?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Yan Qi: "What is this place?"

Guo DaLu: "Don't know."

Yan Qi glared at him and with an irritated tone, snapped, "So what do you know?"

Guo DaLu grinned back at him. "I know that the cook here is pretty good, and the wine is quite nice too. What are you waiting for?" He chuckled as he added, "To not eat would be a waste. Haven't you learned this yet?"

Yan Qi could not stop a charming smile from spreading on his face. "I learned that long ago."

The room not only had a door, it also had windows. Waves of the sweet fragrance of plum blossoms were carried in through the windows.

Yan Qi: "Have you gone outside?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope."

Yan Qi frowned at him. "Why didn't you go outside for a look?"

Guo DaLu: "If I take care of my mouth, I can't take care of my eyes. I thought the mouth was more important than the eyes."

Yan Qi admonished, "You should have at least first sought out the master of this place."

Guo DaLu: "He is going to come find us anyways, so why should we be anxious about looking for him?" As he was just finishing his sentence, the sound of knocking rang on the outside of the door.

A girl, dressed in clothing as white as snow, her eyes bright, her smile enchanting, and her hands carrying two pitchers of wine, walked gracefully into the room. She really did look a little like a fairy in heaven.

Guo DaLu's eyes were bulging out slightly while he gawked. It was only when Yan Qi threw a nasty glare in his direction that he gave a couple of dry coughs and straightened his sitting posture, but he still could not contain his grin. "Who knew that, just when I was starting to worry that there would not be enough wine, wine would arrive?"

The young lady in white hid her mouth daintily behind her hand as she giggled, "Now that you are here, whatever you want, you will have."

Yan Qi inquired, "How did we get here?"

White-dressed young lady: "Naturally, the master of this place rescued you here."

Guo DaLu: "You are the master of this dwelling?"

The white-dressed young lady blinked at him, "Do I look like it?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

The white-dressed young lady smiled charmingly. "Even in my own eyes, I think I don't look like it."

Guo DaLu: "Then who is the master here? Do we know him?"

White-dressed young lady: "I only know with certainty that the master knows you."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Giggling again, the young lady in white replied, "Because the master said that, by yourself, you can eat more than several people combined and specifically instructed me to prepare food and wine for you. Without actually knowing you, how could master understand you so well?"

Guo DaLu chortled, "If that is the case, this person does not just understand me; he is definitely a good friend of mine too."

The white-dressed young lady blinked at him and chimed, "Anyone that treats you to wine is your friend?"

Yan Qi answered in an icy tone, "You are not one bit wrong." The look on his face was rather unsightly and he had even set down his chopsticks. Guo DaLu glanced over at him and did not dare say another word.

White-dressed young lady: "When you two sirs have eaten your fill, I will take you to see the master of this place, who has been waiting all this time for you."

Yan Qi abruptly rose to his feet. "I am full now."

The white-dressed young lady's eyes glimmered as she asked sweetly, "Why is it that the instant you saw me you were full?"

Yan Qi replied nonchalantly, "Because you are even cuter than pork shank."

Plum blossoms. White snow. Curved hallways. Carved pillars.

The white-dressed young lady's face was stony as she led the way in front of them. She neither spoke nor smiled. She really was very sweet, very pretty, but it was also true that she was a little bit chubby.

"Yan Qi went so far as to compare her to pork shank. I cannot believe he even thought of that." Guo DaLu's eyes were on Yan Qi. He wanted to laugh, yet did not dare because the expression on Yan Qi's face was rather ugly. For some reason, he seemed to hate women, especially those who joked

around with Guo DaLu. "He must have been duped or suffered some sort of loss in the past at the hands of a woman." Guo DaLu resolved that he must find some way to enlighten him and inform him that not all women loathsome. Occasionally, there are a few among them who are much more endearing than any man.

They had finished walking the length of that long hallway. Hanging outside the end of that hallway was a curtain made of long strings of beads. They had just walked through when they heard a voice from inside the curtain chortle, "You have come again. Please enter, please enter."

Madam Wei.

Remarkably, it was her voice again. It turns out that she was the master of this house. She was the one who had poisoned the food, pretended to be a ghost, and even went so far as to transport in and attack them with one of those cannons that were used to lay siege on a city. Now, though, she had rescued them and furthermore, had brought out good food and wine to entertain them. Guo DaLu and Yan Qi exchanged several glances with one another, utterly unable to guess what other schemes she may have been hatching.

Madam Wei's smile was still just as regal and alluring, and that faint smile was on her face as she fixed her eyes on Guo DaLu and Yan Qi and stated, "There is no sense in trying to speculate what my plans may be. No one has ever been able to guess my plans."

Guo DaLu sighed, "I believe that sentence."

Madam Wei: "There is another point that you may as well believe too."

Guo DaLu: "What is that?"

Madam Wei: "You are both now allowed to leave at any time. No matter where you go, I will not send anyone to follow you."

Taken aback, Guo DaLu blurted, "You don't want to take our lives?"

Madam Wei: "No."

Guo DaLu: "And you don't want to know where Lin TaiPing is?"

Madam Wei: "Not at this moment, at least."

Guo DaLu: "You spent so much effort in dealing with us, but now you are just letting us go as we please?"

Madam Wei: "Correct."

With another sigh, Guo DaLu told her, "I really cannot believe that."

Madam Wei: "You will not even trust my word?" She asked them unexpectedly, "Do you know who I am?"

Guo DaLu returned, "I know you are an individual who has much wealth, status, and capabilities, but people like you are usually untrustworthy."

Madam Wei stared at him intently. She suddenly beamed at him. "You both must think that the things I do are very strange, but if you truly know who I am, you will not find any of it unusual."

Yan Qi could not help asking, "Then who are you?"

Enunciating each word deliberately, Madam Wei announced, "I am Lin TaiPing's mother."

Enunciating each word deliberately, Madam Wei announced, "I am Lin TaiPing's mother."

As she finished speaking those words, Guo DaLu and Yan Qi were struck with astonishment. They dared not believe it, yet they had no choice but to believe. Even if Madam Wei was someone who had told lies before in her life, right then, she did not look as if she was lying.

Guo DaLu: "Let us say that I believe that you are Lin TaiPing's mother, but how can a mother not know her son's whereabouts?"

Breathing a soft sigh of sadness, Madam Wei answered, "That is the sorrow of being a mother. When a son has grown up, a mother often is not able to understand the things he does." She gave an unexpected smile, then added, "Perhaps this is because he is gradually becoming a man."

Guo DaLu was unable to hold in his question. "What did he actually do?"

Madam Wei said regretfully, "He did not do anything. He merely ran away from home."

Guo DaLu was still for a minute. "Ran away from home? Why would he run away?"

Madam Wei: "He was running away from his wedding."

In bewilderment, Guo DaLu echoed, "Running away from his wedding?"

Forcing a smile, she explained, "I saw that he was gradually growing up, so I arranged a marriage for him. Who could

have known that, the night before his wedding, he would sneak out and flee?”

Guo DaLu was silent for a long while until he could no longer contain his chuckles. “I get it. He did not like the girl.”

Madam Wei: “He had never even seen the girl before.”

Guo DaLu could not help feeling puzzled. “So, if he had never seen her before, how did he know whether she is good or not?”

Madam Wei: “He does not know.”

Guo DaLu: “If he does not know whether she is good or bad, why would he run away?”

Madam Wei sighed, “For the sole reason that this marriage was something I arranged for him. That is why he detested it.”

Guo DaLu laughed in amusement. “The wife is going to be his, so he should be the one to choose anyway. Had you been willing to let him see her first, he may not have tried to escape.” His face became very stern as he told her in a serious tone, “This does not mean he is not filial. When a man becomes an adult, he should more or less have his own views and opinions, otherwise how could he be considered a man?”

Madam Wei was nodding her head slowly. “I was furious at first, but after thinking about it, I actually became quite pleased.”

Yan Qi broke in, “You should be pleased. In the world today, there are not many men who have a mind of their own as he does.”

Guo DaLu: "There may not be many now; however, slowly but surely, there will be more in the future."

Madam Wei broke into a smile. "And so, I have changed my mind. It is not necessary to force him to go back and get married." Her gaze drifted off into the distance. She continued, "I believe, in the process of growing up and maturing, if a boy has the opportunity to go out and forge his own way in the world and toughen himself, overall it should be beneficial to him for the rest of his life."

Guo DaLu heaved a sigh. With a wry smile on his face, he remarked, "It would have been very nice if you had said these words earlier."

Madam Wei: "I did not say this before because I was still a little concerned."

Guo DaLu: "Concerned about what?"

Madam Wei: "Concerned about his friends."

Guo DaLu: "So you did all that merely because you wanted to test us?"

Madam Wei smiled pleasantly at him. "Since you are his good friend, I am certain you will not be upset with me."

Guo DaLu: "Can you set your mind at ease now?"

Her voice gentle, she replied, "I know now that, for him, his friends are not only unhesitant about enduring starvation or dying, they will also reject every kind of temptation. In my eyes, that is even more difficult than dying." She breathed a sigh of admiration. "It is his good fortune to have friends like you. How could I not set my mind at ease?"

“When a child grows up, even though he no longer belongs to his mother, a mother will still always be a mother. Therefore, no matter where he may be, he will always be your child.” If a mother can truly understand this, then her sorrows will turn into joys.

The little city was still simple and peaceful. There are some places that will never change. Only the people change. Only people’s hearts change.

But then, there are some people who will never change either. Even when he saw that Yan Qi had returned, Wang Dong still lay on his bed and did not move. Guo DaLu could not contain himself. “It has been six or seven days since you last saw us. Don’t you have a single question that you would like to ask us?”

Only then did Wang Dong lazily give a big yawn. “What would I ask?”

Guo DaLu: “You should at least ask us whether these last few days have been good or not.”

Wang Dong: “No need for me to ask.”

Guo DaLu: “Why is there no need?”

Wang Dong: “As long as you can both return here alive, then it is already pretty good.”

Yan Qi blinked at him. “But then, you should at least ask whose skin HuoBoPi was going to flay.”

Wang Dong: “Also no need to ask.”

Yan Qi: “Why?”

With a little chuckle, Wang Dong answered nonchalantly, "For people like him, besides themselves, who else can they flay?"

Aside from the one time when he made the move to attack Feng QiWu, in everything he did, Lin TaiPing was always slower than everyone else by half a beat. Regardless of whether it was eating, talking, or walking, he would always do it sluggishly with a look on his face that was not panicked or rushed at all.

He seemed to be the type that, even if flames were licking at his eyebrows, he would not get anxious. Sometimes, Guo DaLu could even believe that he was actually an elderly man. He was not like Wang Dong; he was not lazy, but he had a lukewarm temperament.

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had returned for half a day before he walked into the room unhurriedly. His clothes were neat and in order and his hair combed until it was immaculate.

Regardless of the time or the place, he was always like a hard-shelled fruit that had just been split open: fresh and clean. "At all times and occasions, this guy looks like he is ready for the king to summon him."

A glance passed between Guo DaLu and Yan Qi. They were unable to contain a pair of knowing grins because they had both suddenly thought of Madam Wei. Only a mother like Madam Wei could have a son like Lin TaiPing. "A good tree will never produce rotten fruit."

Lin TaiPing looked over at them but could not figure out what they were smiling about. He muttered, "Judging from the look of things, the two of you must have had lots of fun and been quite happy the last few days."

Guo DaLu chortled, “Extremely happy.”

Lin TaiPing: “Did you know that HuoBoPi has disappeared? That Li Yuan Pawnshop has changed ownership?”

Guo DaLu: “Nope.”

Lin TaiPing: “Such big news and you don’t even know? What have you been doing these last several days?”

Guo DaLu and Yan Qi exchanged another look and gave a little laugh. They had decided earlier that they would not let anyone know what had befallen them the past several days because they felt that it would actually be better if Lin TaiPing did not know.

They did not wish to influence Lin TaiPing’s decision, nor did they want him to feel gratitude towards them. All they hoped was for Lin TaiPing to live with them, free from care, for a period of time. That way, he would certainly become stronger, more mature, and smarter. This was also Madam Wei’s desire for him.

Guo DaLu chuckled as he answered, “We haven't done much these few days. We merely died once after being poisoned, had one encounter with Yama, and were fired at once by a cannon. In the end, the person responsible ended up treating us to a big feast and then we came back.”

Lin TaiPing stared wide-eyed at them for a long moment before unexpectedly sniggering loudly, “I know you guys are very good at exaggerating, but this time it has gone a little overboard. Even a three year old child would never believe you.”

Settling himself in comfortably, Guo DaLu laid down, closed his eyes, and exhaled a long breath of air. With a faint smile

on his face, he said, “I had known all along that no one would believe these things.”

End of Chapter 21

Chapter 22 - Wang Dong's Secret

Every person has secrets.

Wang Dong was a person. Therefore, he, too, had a secret. It was hard to believe that someone like Wang Dong could actually have any sort of secret. He had never done anything alone before. In fact, the amount of time he spent off the bed was minimal. Never in Yan Qi's dreams would he have thought that Wang Dong would also have a secret, yet, the first person who discovered that he had one was Yan Qi.

How did he discover this? The very first time he found out about this secret was because he saw a very bizarre object: he saw a kite. A kite, in itself, is not bizarre, but this particular kite brought about many, many extremely strange and astonishing occurrences. Indeed, it could even be said that these incidents were terrifying.

According to the sequence of the seasons, it should have been spring already. But, you could have looked however you pleased, to the left, to the right, to the east, or to the west, and you still would not have even caught a glimpse of spring's shadow. It was still very cold. The wind still blew hard, and the snow that had built up was still seven or eight inches thick.

This particular day, it was exceptional that the sun was actually out. Wang Dong, Yan Qi, Guo DaLu, and Lin TaiPing were sunbathing in the courtyard. Like all other penniless chaps, they were never willing to pass up the opportunity to sunbathe. During the frigid days of winter, it could be said that sunbathing is one of the limited enjoyments that the impoverished have.

Finding the most comfortable chair, Wang Dong stretched himself out lazily in it beneath the eaves. Lin TaiPing sat on the stone steps beside him, his head propped up by his hands and his eyes staring off into the distance as he pondered over concerns he held in his heart.

Guo DaLu was perplexed. He now knew what Lin TaiPing was thinking about. But what about Yan Qi's secret? Guo DaLu could not restrain himself as he pulled Yan Qi off to the side and whispered, "You can tell me that secret of yours now?" Since they had returned, this was the seventh or eighth time he had asked that question.

Yan Qi's answer this time was identical to all the previous instances. "Just wait for a bit."

Guo DaLu: "When do you want me to wait until?"

Yan Qi: "Until the time that I want to tell you."

Guo DaLu was growing anxious. "Do you really need to wait until I am on the brink of death before you are willing to say it?"

Yan Qi threw a fierce glare at him, but then, the look in his eyes became very peculiar. After a long while, he asked quietly, "You honestly do not know what secret I was going to tell you?"

Guo DaLu: "If I knew, why would I ask you?"

Yan Qi stared intently at him again for another long period. With an unexpected "pfft," he burst out into giggles. Shaking his head, he groaned, "What Wang Laoda said really is correct: when this person should be confused, he is actually extremely intelligent, but when it is time for him to be intelligent, he is slower than everyone else."

Guo DaLu: "I am not a roundworm that lives in your stomach. How would I know what your secret is?"

Yan Qi exhaled a little sigh unexpectedly. "Maybe it is actually good that you do not know."

Guo DaLu: "What is good about it?"

Yan Qi: "What is not good? Aren't we really happy right now?"

Guo DaLu: "After I find out, will I become unhappy?"

With another faint sigh, Yan Qi struggled to explain, "Perhaps... perhaps things will change and we will quarrel everyday or maybe even give each other the silent treatment."

Guo DaLu was gawking at him. Stomping his foot forcefully, he fumed spitefully, "I just don't understand you. You are normally a very frank and direct person but sometimes you act more awkward and difficult than a girl."

Yan Qi: "You are the one who is difficult, not me."

Guo DaLu: "How am I difficult?"

Yan Qi: "Someone doesn't want to do something, so why must you force that someone to do it?"

Guo DaLu: "Who is this someone?"

Yan Qi: "Someone is me."

Guo DaLu gave a drawn out sigh. Cradling his head in his arms, he muttered, "He meant himself but he has to say 'someone.' Even the intonations of his voice are becoming more and more like a woman. How can this be right?"

Yan Qi suddenly smiled sweetly. Purposely changing the topic, he suddenly wondered, "Why do you think HuoBoPi would leave all of a sudden?"

Guo DaLu had been determined not to respond to his question, but after holding himself back for half a day, he finally could not contain himself. "He, himself, was not the one who wanted to go; it was the old woman who forced him to."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because the old woman was afraid that we would go and investigate her identity and background."

Yan Qi: "If that is the case, then her identity must be a big secret and the relationship between her and HuoBoPi must be out of the ordinary."

Guo DaLu: "Mm hm! "

Yan Qi: "Why don't you go nose around and find out where they have gone into hiding?"

Guo DaLu: "Why should I go find out?"

Yan Qi: "To unearth their secret."

Guo DaLu: "Why would I need to unearth someone else's secret? There are some secrets where, no matter how hard you try to dig them up, you will never be successful. But then, when the right time arrives, you will not need to do any digging and you still will know."

Laughing, Yan Qi pointed out, "If you understand this philosophy, why are you still pressuring me to say it?"

Guo DaLu's eyes were fixed on Yan Qi. He suddenly sighed, "Because the one I care about is not that old woman; because I only care about you." Yan Qi turned his head away slowly, like he was intentionally trying to avoid Guo DaLu's gaze.

The instant he turned his head, he saw a kite – a centipede design kite. It was intricate and realistic so that, as it spiralled and danced in the wind against the blue sky and white clouds, it looked like it was really alive. Yan Qi clapped his hands in delight and called, "Look. What is that?"

Guo DaLu had noticed it as well and was also fascinated by it, but he deliberately put a pout on his face. "It is just a kite. What's so different about it? Haven't you ever seen a kite before?"

Yan Qi: "But why would someone fly a kite at this time of the year?"

In an uninterested tone, Guo DaLu stated, "As long as people feel like it, they can fly a kite whenever they please." In reality, of course he knew that now was not the season for flying kites because, even if someone really wanted to fly one, it certainly would not go very high and possibly not even get airborne. This kite, though, was flying up very high and very steady. The person flying it was surely a master of the skill.

Yan Qi: "Do you know how to make a kite?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope. I only know how to eat."

Yan Qi blinked excitedly. With a laugh, he said, "I'm sure Wang Laoda knows how... Wang Laoda! Why don't we make a kite too?" He dashed over to Wang Dong. Suddenly, he stopped in surprise.

Wang Dong had not heard anything he said. He stood there, his eyes wide and bulging, staring straight at that kite. The look in his eyes was extremely peculiar, like he had never before seen a kite. From the expression on his face, it looked as if he thought the kite was a real centipede – a centipede that would eat human flesh.

Yan Qi stood stunned as well because he knew that Wang Dong definitely was not one who was frightened easily. Even if he had seen seventy or eighty live centipedes crawling right in front of him, the color in Wang Dong's face would not change in the slightest. But now, his face looked as white as a sheet of paper.

All of a sudden, the corner of his eye gave a twitch, like he had been pricked by a needle. Yan Qi raised his head. There were another four kites in the sky: a serpent, a scorpion, and an eagle. The largest one, though, was a yellow, four-sided shape. On its surface, written with a bright red brush, were some curvy symbols that nobody could read, like a talisman drawn by a ghost.

Wang Dong jumped to his feet and lurched back into the house looking like he could support himself no longer, like he was going to collapse unconscious at any moment.

By now, Guo DaLu had walked over, and his face carried a flabbergasted look. "What is going on with Wang Laoda?"

Yan Qi exhaled a long breath before answering, "Who knows what is going on with him? The instant he saw those kites, his entire person seemed to change."

Guo DaLu was even more bewildered. "Once he saw the kites, his whole expression changed?"

Yan Qi: "Mm hm."

Guo DaLu drew his brow together. "Could there be something special about these kites?" He lifted his head to stare at those kites in the sky, scrutinizing them carefully for a long time, but he could not make a single conclusion. No one would have been able to draw any conclusions from looking up at them in the sky. A kite is a kite; there was nothing different about these ones. Guo DaLu gave in, "Why don't we go inside and ask Wang Laoda what is going on?"

Yan Qi shook his head. "Asking him is going to be a waste of time. He for sure will not say anything."

Guo DaLu: "But these kites..."

Yan Qi cut him off. "Did you ever think that the puzzle may not lie in the kites themselves?"

Guo DaLu: "Then where do you think it lies?"

Yan Qi: "With the people who are flying them."

Guo DaLu clapped his hands together and exclaimed, "That's right! Wang Laoda may know who are the ones flying these kites."

Yan Qi: "Those people may be enemies from Wang Dong's past."

Lin TaiPing had been listening off to the side the whole time. He suddenly broke in, "I am going to take a look. You guys stay here and await my information." The sentence had not even finished before he had soared over the wall. Though his actions were usually rather sluggish, when real situations arose, his movements were actually quicker than everyone else's.

Guo DaLu looked over at Yan Qi. "Why do we have to wait here for his information?" Yan Qi had not lingered to hear

him finish his question and was already chasing after Lin TaiPing.

For matters involving their friends, none of them were willing to fall behind.

The kites were flying very high, very steady. Assessing their direction, Yan Qi observed, "From the looks of it, these kites were sent into the sky from the graveyard. I used to always fly kites in a graveyard when I was young."

Guo DaLu nodded. "When I was a kid, I always flew my kites in a graveyard, too."

The distance to the graveyard from Wealthy Manor was not far. Very quickly, they had arrived there. The only person there, though, was Lin TaiPing. Guo DaLu queried, "Did you see anything?"

Lin TaiPing: "No. Not even the shadow of a ghost."

Who had sent the kites up into the air?

Five straw men. Five straw men wearing hemp and mourning apparel. And in one hand, they each held a ku sang bang [*staff of mourning, covered in white; held at a funeral]. The strings of the kites were tied onto the other hand. Naturally, straw men cannot fly kites, nor do they ever wear hemp and mourning apparel. Why were these people deliberately trying to be mystifying?

Guo DaLu and the others exchanged a look with one another. They were realizing that this whole situation was becoming more and more complicated. Yan Qi reminded, "The kites were just flown into the sky not long ago. It is possible that the people have not gone far."

Guo DaLu: "Yes. Let's go search around in all directions."

Yan Qi: "I think there must be at least five of them. It would be best if we did not go out alone."

After circling the graveyard once, they noticed the little wooden house. It was in that house that they had found Sour Plum Soup. "Could the people who flew those kites be hiding in that wooden house?" Without discussing anything, their thoughts had all turned in that same direction. Guo DaLu was the first to dash over. Yan Qi cried out after him, "Be careful!" The words had just left his mouth when Guo DaLu kicked open the door and charged in.

The wooden house was the same wooden house, but inside, it had completely changed. The pot and stove that Sour Plum Soup had used to cook were gone. This house, previously dirty and in disarray, had now been swept clean so that there was not even a speck of dust.

A table had been set in the center. On that table was placed five sets of chopsticks, five wine cups, and five bright and shiny knives. The knife blades were thin and sharp, the blade bodies curved, and the knife's shape rather peculiar. Aside from these things, there was nothing else inside.

Guo DaLu had just picked up a knife by its hilt to examine when Yan Qi rushed in. Stomping his foot in frustration, he reprimanded, "Why are you always so incautious when you do anything? You just went barging in here carelessly. What if, by chance, there was someone in this house? Weren't you afraid that someone might have attacked you underhandedly?"

Guo DaLu laughed, "I wasn't afraid."

Yan Qi snapped, "You weren't afraid, but I was." As the words slipped out of his mouth, his face suddenly turned red – a

fierce, bright red. Luckily, nobody had noticed.

Lin TaiPing had been scrutinizing the knives on the table and now, he suddenly piped in, "These knives are used to carve meat."

Guo DaLu: "How do you know?"

Lin TaiPing: "I've seen something like these before. The non-Han people of Sai Wai [*generally refers to the land north of the Great Wall] are very fond of using such knives to cut meat."

Guo DaLu: "Could they be non-Han people that came from Sai Wai?"

Lin TaiPing answered, his tone low, "Could be, except non-Han people only use knives, not chopsticks."

A look of alarm suddenly flickered across Yan Qi's eyes. "There are only knives here, no meat. What meat are they planning on cutting?"

Guo DaLu said with a grin, "In any case, it shouldn't be Wang Dong's flesh." Though he was smiling, it did not look very natural.

Yan Qi was unable to control the cold shiver that came from inside him. "We should hurry and go back. I really don't feel at ease that Wang Laoda has been left alone at home."

Guo DaLu's expression changed. "Right. We cannot fall for these people's trap of 'tricking the tiger into leaving its mountain.' " As they thought of this point, they immediately tore outside. Using the fastest speed they could muster, they flew back through the graveyard. Yan Qi suddenly came to a halt as he cried, "Something's not right."

Guo DaLu: “What is not right?”

Yan Qi’s face had gone pale. “It seems those five straw men had been right here before.” Guo DaLu also could not suppress the spooked tremor that seized his body. Those five straw men had in fact stood in that spot just moments ago, but now, they had vanished.

Blue skies. White clouds. Truly, such good weather had been quite rare of late.

But the kites in the sky had disappeared now as well.

Using the fastest speed possible, they sprinted back. As they reached the front door, they froze in shock again.

Astoundingly, those five straw men were in front of their doorway, still wearing hemp and mourning apparel and still carrying mourning staffs, but on the chest of one was an additional strip of paper that seemed to have words written on it – very small words that were difficult to read clearly. With a gust of wind, the slip of paper was blown up so that it made a rustling sound. It appeared that the paper had been stitched onto the hemp garment with a needle and thread.

Lin TaiPing was the first to reach it, and he stretched out his arm to pull the paper. Surprisingly, it had actually been sewed on quite tightly. He needed to use a bit of strength before he could tear it off.

It was at that exact same instant that the arm of the straw man that had been holding the mourning staff suddenly shot up, striking directly towards Lin TaiPing’s abdomen. Fortunately, though Lin TaiPing’s experience was dismal [in jianghu], his reactions were not slow. With a somersault in midair, he had evaded the staff. However, who could have predicted that,

as the staff propelled upwards, there would also be a dark light that would come shooting from its end?

Lin TaiPing had escaped the mourning staff itself, but it seemed that he had not dodged the concealed weapons hidden inside the staff. He felt a tingle in his right hipbone area, like he had been bitten by a mosquito. By the time he had descended back to the ground, he was not able to stand. In the blink of an eye, his right leg was completely numb and his body was toppling to the ground.

The expression on Guo DaLu's face changed as he realized, "Poisoned needles!"

In total, he had only spoken two words. Once he had finished saying these two words, Yan Qi had already acted, fast as the wind, with one hand sealing the acupoints surrounding Lin TaiPing's hipbone in all four directions. The other hand had drawn a dagger out from a tube in his boot. There was a flash from the blade, and Lin TaiPing's clothing had been slashed open. Another flash, and the flesh where the wound had been sustained was cut off. Blood spurted.

Black blood!

Guo DaLu's eyes were bulging as he watched. He had never thought that Yan Qi's ability to react would be so fast or that his actions would be even more rapid. "I have already died seven times." It was only now that Guo DaLu believed this statement was true. Only someone who had died seven times could have such a strong ability to react to circumstances and such rich experience and knowledge.

Lin TaiPing was in so much pain he had broken out into a cold sweat, but he still had not forgotten about the strip of paper in his hand. Gritting his teeth and gasping for air, he directed them, "Take a look. What is written on the paper?"

On that slip was a line of densely written characters about the size of a fly's head: "If you are not Wang Dong, then you are a ghost that died for him."

The wind was blowing. The straw men were swaying in the wind, as if they were trying to intimidate them with their display of strength. Guo DaLu's fury escalated suddenly, and he threw a punch at that straw man. Naturally, a straw man cannot retaliate, nor can it dodge.

Guo DaLu had just struck out when Yan Qi tackled him at the waist. Though his fist had not collided solidly with the straw man, it still managed to hit it. The instant his fist contacted its chest, he, too, felt as if he had been bitten by a mosquito. And then, all he could sense was an itching of his fist and a hint of tingling. A black dot could be seen on the joint of his middle finger.

The tip of Yan Qi's dagger immediately nicked that dot. The blood that flowed out had turned black already. Poisoned blood, and it emitted a stench of rotting. But Yan Qi was not bothered by the smell, nor did he care about it being filthy. Mouthful after mouthful, he sucked out that poisoned blood until it was completely expelled.

Guo DaLu nearly could not prevent his tears from surging out. He had all of a sudden realized that what Yan Qi had for him was not all just friendship. Rather, they were feelings that were even deeper and more intimate than friendship. But he could not say what these feelings actually were. There was not a single word that could describe the gratitude that he felt in his heart.

Yan Qi blew out a long breath and inquired, "How do you feel now?"

Guo DaLu gave a sickly smile. "All I feel right now is that I'm an idiot. One hundred percent an idiot."

Lin TaiPing had been observing them the whole time. He suddenly heaved a long sigh. "You truly are an idiot." The color of his face was much better than a moment ago, but his leg was still unable to move. Yan Qi had not sucked the poisoned blood out of his wound, but he did not have a single complaint, nor did he have any intention of blaming him. He seemed to believe that this ought to be the case. Could it be that he had perceived something? Had he seen through a secret that only Guo DaLu could not see through?

Yan Qi's face flushed again, and he turned around quickly. Using the point of his dagger, he flipped open the hemp garment on the straw man. It was then Guo DaLu could see that many sharp needles had been inserted into the straw. Under the sunlight, the tips of the needles gave off a black light.

Even an idiot could discern that the poison on a single needle was enough to take a person's life. Had it not been for Yan Qi holding him back a moment ago, his fist would have come down straight onto those. If that had happened, even if he could preserve his life, his hand could be considered a write-off.

By now, Lin TaiPing certainly had worked it out. The thread on the paper was connected to a mechanism on the mourning staff. The instant he yanked on the paper, the mechanism had been triggered. The straw man's entire body seemed to be ready with a killing ambush of poisoned needles.

Guo DaLu gave a long sigh. With a wry smile, he remarked, "A single straw man could actually defeat us two live and

grown men. If I had not encountered this myself, no matter who told it to me, I still would not believe it.”

Lin TaiPing: “If a straw man is already so powerful, then the people who made it should be even more formidable.”

Guo DaLu: “If they weren’t formidable, why would Wang Laoda be so scared?”

Yan Qi’s face had drained of color. “These straw men have shown up here now; do you think those people are already here?”

Lin TaiPing cried out, his tone panicked, “You guys hurry and go in to check on Wang Laoda. You do not need to take care of me. My hands are still capable of moving.” Guo DaLu did not speak a single word in response; he merely stretched out his arms and supported Lin TaiPing to his feet.

Yan Qi had already charged into the manor, calling out loudly as he ran. “Wang Laoda ... Wang Dong!”

No answer. Not a sound.

Wang Dong had disappeared.

The bedding on his bed was in disarray, and Wang Dong was not on the bed or in the house. Guo DaLu and the others searched thoroughly from the front to the rear, but they still could not find him. They all understood Wang Dong. Very few matters had the ability to arouse Wang Dong from his bed; even fewer had the ability to compel him to go out alone.

“Could something have happened here? Could Wang Dong already...” Guo DaLu did not even let his thoughts turn in that direction.

Lin TaiPing was lying on Wang Dong's bed. His pale face was starting to turn red from anxiety. "I already told you not to worry about taking care of me. Hurry and find Wang Laoda," he yelled.

Guo DaLu was getting anxious. In a loud voice, he threw back, "Of course we have to find him, but tell me, where should I go to look?"

Lin TaiPing suddenly grew silent. He looked over at Yan Qi. Yan Qi stood still, thinking. They now had two people who had sustained injuries, yet they still did not even know who their opponent was. Up until this point in time, they still did not even have a notion.

Right then, they only knew one thing: these people undoubtedly held an enmity toward Wang Dong, and this enmity was very deep-seated. But what was the use in knowing this point? There was practically no difference from not knowing anything at all.

It was at this moment that the sound of footsteps was heard out in the hallway. Guo DaLu and the others' hearts nearly stopped beating. The one approaching definitely could not be a straw man. Straw men cannot walk!

Straw men cannot walk!

Yan Qi signalled to Guo DaLu with his eyes. In a flash, their bodies were seen darting forward as, simultaneously, they each hid behind a door. The echoes of the footsteps were getting closer and finally halted in front of the door. The dagger in Yan Qi's hand was raised. The door had only been half-closed. A hand on the other side was pushing it open. Yan Qi's wrist twisted. Like lightning, the dagger slashed at the meridian of that hand.

From the bed, Lin TaiPing unexpectedly shouted, "Hold your hand! "

The instant his cry rose up, Yan Qi's arm immediately came to a stiff halt, the edge of the blade was less than half an inch away from the vein on that hand's wrist. But it still was very steady and continued pushing on the door, as if its nerves were cast from iron.

The door opened. Wang Dong stepped unhurriedly into the room. In his other hand was a large jug of wine. Light glinted off the blade in Yan Qi's hand. Lin TaiPing was lying on the bed. Anyone could have discerned that he was wounded.

Wang Dong, though, appeared to not notice anything at all, and his face was void of expression. It would seem that all the nerves in this person's entire body were casted of iron. He slowly walked into the room and slowly set the wine on the table.

The first one who could contain his annoyance no longer was Guo DaLu. "Where did you go?" he interrogated loudly.

Unruffled, Wang Dong responded, "To buy wine." His answer was very natural, as it was the most rational thing in the world to do. "To buy wine." In a time like this, he still would go to buy wine. Guo DaLu stared at him, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

After using his palm to smack open the lute that had been sealing the mouth of the jug, Wang Dong inhaled. Appearing to be satisfied with what he smelled, the corner of his lips at last showed the trace of a smile. "This wine is not too bad. Here, everyone come drink a couple of cups."

Guo DaLu could not help snapping, "I do not feel like drinking right now."

Wang Dong: "Even if you don't feel like drinking, you still have to. You must."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because this wine is the wine I am using to bid you farewell."

Guo DaLu repeated in shock, "Farewell? Why are you bidding us farewell?"

Wang Dong: "Because you will all be leaving immediately."

Guo DaLu jumped up. "Who said we are leaving?"

Wang Dong: "I did."

Yan Qi cut in, "But we do not want to leave."

Wang Dong's face was hard as he stated in a cool tone, "Even if you do not want to, you still have to. Do you all intend on living here and freeloading the rest of your lives?" His expression like steel, he questioned, "Have you paid rent while you lived here?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Wang Dong gave an icy snicker. "If that is the case, then what right do you have to stay and continue freeloading?"

Yan Qi suddenly piped in, "Fine. If you say leave, then we will leave." He had said he would go and now he truly was leaving, except he first walked in front of Guo DaLu and gave a little wink.

Guo DaLu's eyes darted back and forth. "Yes. We will leave. What is the big deal?" He, too, got up to go, as if he could not stand to stay there for another moment.

Lin TaiPing was stunned. "You are not even going to drink the wine?"

Guo DaLu: "We have already been forced out. What face do we have to drink the wine?"

Lin TaiPing looked over at Wang Dong. There still was not any emotion on Wang Dong's face as he said coldly, "That is fine if you are not going to drink. Did you think the wine will become mouldy if I just leave it to sit?"

Lin TaiPing: "How about I stay here? I am not able to walk."

With a stony look, Wang Dong answered, "If you cannot walk out, then crawl out."

Lin TaiPing was silent for a long time. At last, he let out a sigh and, limping, followed the others out of the room. Wang Dong stood in that spot, unmoving, his eyes cold as he watched them walk out the door. After a while, he heard a "peng," but did not know who had been the one who had heavily closed the main door outside.

Wang Dong suddenly lifted up the jug of wine on the table with both his hands. "Gulp, gulp." In a single breath, he guzzled down seven or eight mouthfuls before ceasing. Wiping his mouth, he grumbled, "Good wine. People would actually refuse to drink such a good wine. If they are not idiots, what else can they be?" He stared at the jug in his hands. That pair of icy cold eyes unexpectedly turned red, as if tears could start flowing down at any minute.

Without turning his head once to look back, Yan Qi walked out the front door. He stopped. Guo DaLu walked up next to

him, then suddenly halted also. Lin TaiPing had followed them outside. With a “peng,” he closed the door. Glaring at them, he accused, “I never would have thought that, the instant you stated you were going to leave, you really did go.”

Guo DaLu looked over at Yan Qi, who did not say anything and instead, took a seat on the stone steps in front of the doorway, facing the straw men. Guo DaLu immediately sat himself down also and fixed his eyes on the straw men as he mumbled, “Weird things happen every year. This year seems to have a particularly large amount though. Straw men not only know how to fly kites, they also can kill people. What do you say; is that weird or not?”

Lin TaiPing: “Weird.” He, too, sat down, one hand still pressed tightly against his wound. By now, he finally understood Guo DaLu and Yan Qi’s intentions, and so, he did not say anything else.

They did not know how much time had elapsed when they heard the sound of Wang Dong’s footsteps as he walked out, passed through the courtyard, stepped up to the front door, and barred the door shut.

All of a sudden, the bar was yanked out again and the door flew open. Wang Dong stood in the entrance, his eyes wide as he gaped at them. Yan Qi, Guo DaLu, and Lin TaiPing sat in a row outside the door. None of them looked back at him. Wang Dong was not able to stop himself as he exclaimed, “Why haven’t you left yet? What are you doing sitting here?”

The three of them paid him no heed. Yan Qi only threw a look at Guo DaLu out of the corner of his eye. “Is it illegal for us to sit here?”

Guo DaLu: “Not illegal.”

Lin TaiPing: “Even those straw men can sit here; why can’t we?”

Wang Dong barked at them, “This place is my front door. You are obstructing my way by sitting here.”

Yan Qi glanced over at Guo DaLu again. “Someone says we are obstructing his way.”

Guo DaLu: “Well then, let’s sit a little ways over.”

The three of them rose together to their feet, walked to the opposite side, and sat down in a row again, facing the front door. Yan Qi asked, “Is it okay if we sit here?”

Guo DaLu: “Why would it not be okay? This is not inside someone’s house or obstructing any way.”

Lin TaiPing: “In addition, we can sit here however long it pleases us to sit here.”

Wang Dong glowered at them. They looked left, they looked right, but they did not look over at Wang Dong. He finally yelled out, “What do you want to do by just sitting here?”

Guo DaLu: “We don’t want to do anything. We are just sitting, that’s all.”

Yan Qi: “If it makes us happy to sit here, then we will. Nobody can do anything about it.”

Lin TaiPing: “It is nice and cool here.”

Yan Qi: “Nice and cool and comfortable.”

Guo DaLu: “On top of that, no one will come and collect rent from us.”

Wang Dong suddenly whipped his head around and marched back inside. "Peng!" The door was closed forcefully once again.

Yan Qi looked over at Guo DaLu; Guo DaLu looked at Lin TaiPing. At the same time, the three of them all started howling in laughter. But though they were laughing, the grins on their faces carried a gloomy, dejected feel.

The sun had already set. Once the sun sets, the sky will soon grow dark. And once it grew dark, what would happen in that place? No one knew; indeed, no one even dared to hazard a guess.

Yan Qi reached over to lift up Guo DaLu's hand as he asked quietly, "How is your injury doing?"

Guo DaLu: "Won't hinder anything. I can still beat up people as before."

Only then did Yan Qi turn towards Lin TaiPing. "What about you?"

Lin TaiPing: "My wound is starting to have some pain."

Yan Qi exhaled a breath of relief. "Then that means there was no harm." If a wound from a poisoned weapon started to hurt, it meant that the venom had been completely purged out.

Guo DaLu's mind was still not at ease, and so he asked further, "Does it hurt tremendously?"

Lin TaiPing gave a weak smile. "Still okay. Though I may not be able to jump over any walls, I can still beat people up just the same."

Yan Qi: "Are you guys hungry?"

Guo DaLu: "So hungry I could wolf you down."

Yan Qi chuckled, "But even when your belly is hungry, you can still beat up people just the same, correct?"

Guo DaLu laughed in response. "Correct answer."

As expected, the sky had grown dark. Their faces were gradually seemed to show an apprehensive air.

But now, they really were preparing to beat up people. Guo DaLu's hands were clenched tightly into a pair of fists. His eyes were wide as he remarked, "Right now, it truly is 'all things are ready, all that is missing is an east wind [a common saying which means that all things have been prepared and only one important requirement is missing].' "

Lin TaiPing could not restrain his curiosity. "What is the east wind?"

Guo DaLu: "The people who are going to suffer a beating."

At that moment, he saw a person – a person carrying a jug of wine.

The front door had opened abruptly, and Wang Dong, carrying a jug of wine, had stepped outside. This time, he did not pay them any attention but rather, took a seat on the stone steps in front of the door. The four of them sat facing each other. No one said anything.

The first person who could not hold it any longer was, of course, Guo DaLu. Exhaling a sigh, he muttered, "I seem to

recall that, just a while ago, someone was going to treat us to wine.”

Wang Dong neither responded nor even looked at him, but he tossed the wine jug over to him. No matter what object you threw at Guo DaLu, there was a chance that he would not be able to catch it, but when it came to alcohol... If what was tossed was a jug of wine, a Guo DaLu who was fast asleep would still be able catch it. In a single breath, he had poured several gulps down his throat. He handed the jug over to Yan Qi, who drank a few mouthfuls before passing it on to Lin TaiPing.

Wang Dong spoke up unexpectedly, “A wounded person who still wants to drink must be sick of living.”

Lin TaiPing: “Who said I am wounded? I was just bitten by a little bug, that’s all.”

Wang Dong could not help asking, “What type of bug?” All of a sudden, he darted over towards them and seized the wine from them. With a look of steel on his face, he demanded, “Just how long do you intend on sitting here?”

Again, Guo DaLu was not able to contain himself. “Until someone comes here looking for you.”

Wang Dong: “Who said someone will come looking for me?”

Guo DaLu: “I said.”

Wang Dong: “And how would you know?”

Guo DaLu: “These straw men told me.” Glancing at Wang Dong from the corner of his eye, he giggled, “Not only do they know how to fly kites, they can also talk. What do you say; is that bizarre or not?”

The look on Wang Dong's face changed again. Slowly, he withdrew backwards and sat back down on the stone steps. Stillness fell over their surroundings. Only the sound of wine inside the jug could be heard.

Yan Qi broke the silence unexpectedly. "The wine in the jug is speaking also. Can you hear it?"

Guo DaLu: "What is it saying?"

Yan Qi: "It said, someone's hand is quivering so much that its head is starting to spin."

Wang Dong leapt abruptly to his feet, glaring at him. Yan Qi still did not so much as glance at Wang Dong. The three of them looked east and gazed west; they looked everywhere, except at Wang Dong.

Suddenly, a spark flew in their direction, landing on the first straw man. A "poof" was heard and the straw man was immediately ablaze. The flames were a sickly bluish-green color and gentle threads of smoke were being released. His expression transforming rapidly, Wang Dong called, "Retreat quickly. Withdraw back into the manor."

His expression transforming rapidly, Wang Dong called, "Retreat quickly. Withdraw back into the manor."

With a whipping motion of his arm, he tossed the wine jug to Guo DaLu, turned around to lift up Lin TaiPing, and then was hurtling back through the main door. Finally, Wang Dong had moved. He either did not move or once he did, he was faster than everyone else.

Guo DaLu was moving also, but he first put the jug of wine down. This was because he had not moved back into the manor but rather, had raced off in the direction the spark had come from. And because he had charged off, Yan Qi

naturally had to follow after him. Wang Dong shouted at them, "Hurry and retreat! That direction is not safe to go!"

Guo DaLu had not heard. It was as if he had suddenly grown deaf. And if he had not heard, then Yan Qi of course did not hear also.

Lin TaiPing sighed, "That guy loves going to places that he should not go. Haven't you realized by now this bad habit of his?"

If a house is called a "mountain manor" [Note: "Wealthy Manor" should actually be "Wealthy Mountain Manor" as a literal translation], as a minimum, it should satisfy several conditions. The house definitely cannot be too small. Even if it is not constructed on a mountain, it should at least be built at the foot of the mountain. Outside the main entrance of the house, large or small, there is usually a grove of trees. Even though "Wealthy Manor" was not the least bit wealthy, at the very least, it could still be called a "mountain manor." Therefore, outside its door there, too, was a grove. The spark from a moment ago seemed to have come from there.

Guo DaLu lowered his voice. "From behind which tree did the spark come shooting out from?"

Yan Qi: "I could not see it clearly. You?"

Guo DaLu: "I did not see either."

The sky had already grown dark, and it was even darker inside the woods. Nobody's shadow could be seen; no sound could be heard.

Yan Qi: "I think we should first go back and consult with Wang Laoda."

Guo DaLu: “He is the one who will not consult with us. What d*mn use is there for us to consult among ourselves?” When swear words started coming from his lips, it was an indication that his anger had risen.

Yan Qi: “ ‘Never enter any woods.’ Don’t you understand any of the basic rules of jianghu?”

Guo DaLu: “I don’t understand. I never was an experienced person of jianghu. All those useless rules of jianghu, I do not understand a single one.” His body suddenly pounced forward, and then he had already scurried into the trees.

Within the dimness of the woods, there appeared to be the gleam of a cold light. Guo DaLu’s eyes had not yet clearly seen what it was but his body was already tearing towards it. And then, he saw a knife. A curved knife. A knife used to slice flesh.

The knife had been stabbed into a tree, nailing a strip of paper in place. Needless to say, there were words on that paper, very small words that, even under the light of day, would be hard to read clearly. Guo DaLu was just about to stretch his hand forward and extract the knife when Yan Qi grabbed him. His face ashen and his eyes wide, Yan Qi snapped, “Is it not enough that you fell once for the trick? Are you going to fall for it a second time?” He was worried and angry. Guo DaLu, however, had begun to chuckle. “What are you laughing at?” Yan Qi demanded.

Guo DaLu: “I’m laughing at you.”

Yan Qi could not restrain his angry reply. “You are laughing about bull**t.” When he started yelling out swear words from his mouth, it meant he was infuriated.

Guo DaLu ceased his laughter. Putting on a serious expression, he explained, "Even if they wanted to trick me, they should use an original method. Why would they use the same ploy as before? Do you really think they believe I am a fool?"

Scowling at him, Yan Qi retorted, "Do you think you are not a fool?"

Guo DaLu breathed out a sigh. With a wry smile on his face, he consented, "Fine. If you tell me to not use my hands, I won't use them, but it should be all right if I just go over and take a look." He really did put his hands behind his back and walk over to the tree. Not using the hands and only using the eyes to look truly seemed like a good plan, and everything appeared as if it would be all right.

But the words on the slip of paper were just too small. He had no choice but to step a little closer. At last, he could vaguely make out the characters written on the paper: "Be careful of your feet..." By the time he could see those five words clearly, his feet gave way beneath him, and he was plunging downwards. A trap had been set on the ground.

A shout slipped out from Yan Qi. "Careful..." Amidst his cry, he had already darted over and grabbed ahold of Guo DaLu's hand. Exerting a force through his own hand, Guo DaLu used the momentum and leapt upwards. His lightness kung fu was not weak and he jumped very high.

Alas, the higher he jumped, the worse it was for him. All that was heard was a crashing sound of leaves, and then a net suddenly came hurtling down from the top of the tree. A very large net. Even if Guo DaLu had wings or even if it was a bird in his place, it still would not prevent them from being enveloped by the net.

In addition, his body had already been soaring up in midair. It was as if he had hurled himself into the net, and now, no matter which direction he tried to flee, it was too late. Not only was he unable to dodge it, Yan Qi was not able to either.

Not only was he unable to dodge it, Yan Qi was not able to either.

Just when it appeared that the two of them would be ensnared, a dark shadow all of a sudden was flying towards them like a cannonball. It was so fast it was simply inconceivable. The shadow brushed over their heads. Stretching out a hand, it snatched up the net.

This dark shadow was not a cannonball; it was a person. It was Lin TaiPing.

As Lin TaiPing reached out to seize the net, his body was still soaring forward like a real cannonball, flying out two to three zhang [1 zhang = 3 1/3 metres] before his momentum finally slowed. By now, Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had retreated. They saw Lin TaiPing hanging in one spot, one hand gripping a tree branch, the other clutching that net, and his body swinging back and forth incessantly.

Guo DaLu's heart was still pounding, and he could not help exhaling a lengthy breath. Smiling cynically, he said, "Were it not for you, I am afraid that this time I really would have 'sent myself into the net.' "

Lin TaiPing smiled back at them. "You do not need to thank me."

Guo DaLu: "Who do I thank if I don't thank you?"

Lin TaiPing: "Thank the person behind you."

Guo DaLu whipped his head around. Only then did he discover Wang Dong, his face emotionless, standing behind him.

Lin TaiPing grinned. "I already told you long ago that I am in no shape to jump over any walls right now."

Guo DaLu: "But, just now, you..."

Lin TaiPing: "Just now, it was Wang Laoda using his strength to fling me over here. Otherwise, how could I be so fast?"
Indeed, there was no person in the world who could be that quick. Had he not drawn on the force of Wang Dong's throw, it was impossible for anyone to have that sort of speed.

Guo DaLu stole a glance over at Wang Dong. Smiling apologetically, he complimented, "It looks like Wang Laoda's strength is not insignificant."

Lin TaiPing: "But Wang Laoda really admires you."

Guo DaLu: "Admires me?"

Lin TaiPing: "His strength may be great but your courage is even greater."

Guo DaLu glared at him. "Must you act like a monkey and hang there while you talk?"

Lin TaiPing grinned widely at him again. "I wanted to get down a long time ago, but unfortunately, my legs will not do as they are told."

Wang Dong had not opened his mouth the whole time; neither had Yan Qi. They were both staring at Guo DaLu. Guo DaLu could only force a smile as he admitted, "It seems today, not only have I not done one thing right, I have not even said one sentence that was correct."

Sighing, Yan Qi told him, "This sentence of yours is finally correct."

A lamp burned in the room.

Aside from the lamp, on the table, there was also a slip of paper, a knife, and a jug of wine. This was because, in the end, Guo DaLu still could not stop himself and had to remove the knife from the tree. And of course, he could not forget to bring the wine back with him. Though this person may not have looked like an ox, he surely had the temperament of one [i.e. stubborn]. He was actually very pleased with himself as he beamed, "I had told you earlier that it would be fine to pull out the knife. I knew they were going to switch to use a fresh and original tactic. Wasn't this trick very fresh and original?"

Yan Qi answered grumpily, "Extremely fresh. Even fresher than the fish inside a net." He picked up the knife on the table as he continued, "I now know what meat this knife is used to carve."

Guo DaLu blinked at him. "Is it for carving fish meat?"

Yan Qi: "You have finally said another correct sentence."

Guo DaLu: "Well then, I might as well be a drunk fish." He lifted up the jug with both his hands, all the while still mumbling to himself, "Drunken shrimp is a delicacy of Jiangnan so the taste of drunken fish cannot be bad either." But the wine had not yet touched his lips before Wang Dong had snatched the jug away from him. Guo DaLu stood stunned for a moment. "Since when did you become the same as me: a drunkard?"

Wang Dong: "This wine cannot be consumed."

Guo DaLu: "It could be consumed just a little while ago. Why are we not allowed to drink it now?"

Wang Dong: "Because then was then and now is now."

Yan Qi's eyes were looking all around as he asked, "Where did you put the jug of wine ja moment ago?"

Guo DaLu: "In front of the door."

Yan Qi: "When we all were in the woods, there was nobody by the door, right?"

Guo DaLu: "Right."

Yan Qi: "That is why this wine cannot be consumed anymore."

Guo DaLu: "Is it possible that, in just that little amount of time, someone had already poisoned the wine?"

Yan Qi: "That little amount of time just a while ago was enough to poison eighty jugs of wine."

Guo DaLu broke into a guffaw. "You are overexaggerating how frightful these people actually are. Could they really be ones who leave 'no opening left unentered' [a saying that means to seize every opportunity] and will not let go of a single chance to inflict harm on someone?"

Wang Dong did not speak. Without warning, he walked out the door and, taking the jug that had been in his hands, smashed it forcefully into the ground. The jug shattered; wine poured out all over the ground. Heaving a sigh, Guo DaLu muttered, "What a pity. Good..." The sound of his voice suddenly cut short. His body had frozen in shock.

A very, very small snake was slowly slithering out from amongst the broken shards of the container. This snake was so small that it was rather bizarre. However, the smaller the snake, the more venomous it is.

The look on Guo DaLu's face had changed. He could not help giving another sigh as he mumbled to himself, "It looks like they really are people who leave 'no opening left unentered.'"

Yan Qi suddenly exclaimed, " 'No Opening Left Unentered' Scarlet Serpent." Alarmed, he looked over at Wang Dong. "Is it 'No Opening Left Unentered' Scarlet Serpent?"

Wang Dong's face was ashen. Slowly, he turned himself around, walked back into the room, and sat down beside the lamp. To their surprise, this time, he did not lie down on the bed. Yan Qi trailed closely after him and pressed, "Is it him? Is it really him?"

For a long time, Wang Dong remained silent. Finally, he gave a slow nod of his head. Yan Qi blew out a long breath. Step after step, he moved backwards before abruptly lying down. This time, it was him who had lain down on the bed.

Guo DaLu had followed them, all the while asking, "What type of gadget is a no opening left unentered scarlet serpent?"

Yan Qi: "It is a person." Not only had his entire body seemed to go limp, his voice also appeared to be breathy and without strength.

Guo DaLu: "What sort of person is he? Do you know him?"

There was a sarcastic smile on Yan Qi's lips as he answered, "If I did know him, it would be a marvel that I have still lived

to this day.” He bounded to his feet rapidly and charged over in front of Wang Dong again. “But you must know him?”

Again, Wang Dong sat in silence for a long while. All of a sudden, he grinned as he stated, “I am still alive right now.”

Yan Qi sighed. “A person who actually knows him and is still alive. That is not an easy feat.”

The smile on Wang Dong’s face gradually disappeared. At last, he, too, gave a sigh and said, “Indeed, it is not easy.”

Guo DaLu nearly shouted out in exasperation. “So are you talking about a person or a snake?”

Yan Qi: “Person.”

Guo DaLu: “This individual’s name is Scarlet Serpent?”

Yan Qi: “And furthermore, is ‘No Opening Left Unentered.’ That means, you only need to be slightly inattentive and he will be able to poison you.”

Guo DaLu: “Slightly inattentive? Everyone has times when they are not paying attention.”

With another sigh, Yan Qi said, “That is why, if he wants to poison you, you only have one route you can take.”

Guo DaLu: “What route?”

Yan Qi: “To be poisoned by him.”

Guo DaLu unconsciously drew in a sharp breath of cold air. “All those devious schemes used to harm people, they were all his doing?”

Yan Qi: “Even though this person’s proficiency in poisoning can be regarded as number one in the world, his other skills

are nothing great to speak about.”

Guo DaLu released the breath he had been holding. “Now I can set my mind at ease.”

Yan Qi: “Unfortunately, aside from him, there are others as well.”

Guo DaLu: “Who else is there?”

Yan Qi: “Thousand Hands Thousand Eyes Centipede God.”

Guo DaLu: “Thousand Hands Thousand Eyes?”

Yan Qi: “In other words, it means that when this person releases and catches projectile weapons, it is as if he has one thousand hands and one thousand eyes. Supposedly, there are hidden weapons on his entire body, from the top to the bottom, and even his nose can launch projectile weapons.”

Throwing a look over at Wang Dong, Guo DaLu giggled, “Very good. Once I see this person, I will first knock his nose in flat.”

Yan Qi blinked at him. “But if you come across ‘Rescuer of the Poor and Needy’ Hong NiangZi [Red Lady], I am afraid that you will be reluctant to hit her.”

Puzzled, Guo DaLu repeated, “ ‘Rescuer of the Poor and Needy’ Hong NiangZi? Hearing this name, one would think that she is an extremely good person.”

Yan Qi: “She is a good person. She knows that most of mankind is caught in suffering, and so, she wants to help them transcend out of this life and reincarnate a little earlier.”

With a sigh, Guo DaLu remarked, "If that is the case, she does not really seem to be a good person."

Yan Qi: "In a group of 800,000 people, you will not be able to pick out a single person as good as her."

Guo DaLu: "And what special ability does she have?"

Yan Qi's face hardened and he said coolly, "It would be best if you did not know about her abilities."

Blinking innocently, Guo DaLu asked, "Is she a very beautiful woman?"

Yan Qi: "Even if she is, she should now be an elderly woman – a very beautiful elderly woman."

Guo DaLu: "She is already seventy or eighty years old?"

Yan Qi: "Not yet."

Guo DaLu: "Fifty or sixty?"

Yan Qi: "It seems not quite either."

Guo DaLu: "Around forty or so?"

Yan Qi: "That should be pretty close."

Guo DaLu: "At most, that can be considered the cougar years. How can you say she is an elderly woman?"

Glowering at him, Yan Qi snapped, "What does her age have to do with you? Do you care?"

Guo DaLu: "When did I say I care?"

Yan Qi: "If you do not care, why are you grinning like a mole cricket?"

Guo DaLu: “Because I am a mole cricket.”

Yan Qi gave him another fierce look but in the end, he could not help bursting out in giggles. Taking advantage of this opening, Guo DaLu immediately jumped in, “From what you have said, it would seem that her skills are specifically targeted against men.”

A stony look covered Yan Qi’s face again. “I do not know what type of skills she has. All I know is the number of men who have died by her hands is not a small one.”

All throughout their conversation, Lin TaiPing had been reclined in a chair off to the side, but now he broke in, “Did she make the straw men?”

Yan Qi: “No.”

Lin TaiPing: “If it was not her, then who was it?”

Yan Qi: “ ‘Yi Jian Song Zong’ [‘First Meeting, Pay Last Respects’ ; i.e. first meeting will be your funeral] Cui MingFu [Life-Hastening Talisman].”

Lin TaiPing’s brow was knit together as he echoed, “Life-Hastening Talisman?”

Yan Qi: “This individual not only has a belly full of devious schemes, he also has a pair of skilful hands: changing his appearance and disguises, information gathering devices, complex concealed weapons, unusual weapons – reportedly he is adept in every one of these.

Realization flashed across Guo DaLu’s eyes as he murmured, “Now I understand.”

Yan Qi: “What is it you understand?”

Guo DaLu: "A snake, a centipede, a scorpion [* to represent a cruel woman], a talisman. All that is missing now is the eagle."

"When Wang Laoda and I entered the woods just now, we seemed to see a shadow flying up from the tree where the fishing net had been dropped," Lin TaiPing piped in.

Yan Qi: "A fishing net is not able to drop from a tree by itself. Someone had to have been in the tree."

Guo DaLu: "Where did that person go?"

Lin TaiPing replied with a wry smile, "At that instant, I had just been flung out by Wang Laoda. Do you think I could be bothered about other people right then? Furthermore, that person's lightness kung fu is very formidable. He almost appeared to be like an eagle."

Yan Qi: " 'Flies, Soaring into the Sky' King of Eagles! "

Guo DaLu clapped his hands together. "Five kites, five people. Everything is now accounted for."

Yan Qi: "Among those five people, not only can the Overlord of Eagles be considered to have the best lightness kung fu, his martial art purportedly is also the strongest."

Guo DaLu: "In my view, out of these five, the hardest to deal with is still that 'Rescuer of the Poor and Needy' Hong NiangZi."

Lin TaiPing: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because we are all men."

Yan Qi's voice was icy as he scorned, "If men were not lechers, even if she had abilities greater than the heavens,

she would not be able to use any of them.”

Guo DaLu heaved a lengthy sigh. “But how many men in the world are not lecherous?”

Wang Dong had been sitting the whole time, his face unreadable, not moving at all. In times that he did not need to move, he absolutely would not budge. Yan Qi moved a chair over and sat down across from Wang Dong. “When you saw those kites, you knew they were coming to give you trouble,” he stated.

Guo DaLu moved a chair over towards them also and added, “And so, you wanted to force us away because you knew that there would be complete turmoil wherever these people were.”

Yan Qi: “You did not want us to get pulled into the muddy waters of chaos, so you tried to drive us out.”

Guo DaLu: “But what you did not know is that we had already entered the muddy waters long ago.”

Yan Qi: “From the first day that we met you, we have been in it.”

Guo DaLu: “Because we are friends.”

Yan Qi: “That is why, no matter where you may be, we will be there too.”

Guo DaLu: “That is why, you may want to send us away now, but it is already too late.”

Wang Dong had been watching them without speaking. He knew that there was no longer any need for him to say anything now. He feared that the instant he opened his mouth, hot tears would start pouring from his eyes.

Friends. This word was so simple, yet at the same time, so majestic. Wang Dong was kneading his hands as, enunciating each word, he stated simply, "You are all truly my friends."

This sentence was enough. You only needed to truly understand the significance of this one statement, and then nothing else needed to be said. Yan Qi was smiling. Lin TaiPing, too, was smiling. Guo DaLu tightly clasped Wang Dong's hands. All they needed to hear was this one sentence; it was enough to them. Now, the only question they had was "How can we send this trouble away?"

Yan Qi: "The instant I saw that kite, I knew that trouble had arrived."

Wang Dong: "The kite was a form of warning."

Yan Qi: "If they were coming to give you trouble, why would they forewarn you and allow you to be on your guard?"

Wang Dong: "For the reason that they do not want me to die too quickly." His complexion had paled. He continued slowly, "Because they recognize that the kind of terror a person experiences as he is waiting for death is much more painful than death itself."

He continued slowly, "Because they recognize that the kind of terror a person experiences as he is waiting for death is much more painful than death itself."

With a sigh, Yan Qi remarked, "It appears that the trouble will not be small."

"Truly not small at all," Wang Dong agreed.

Guo DaLu suddenly gave a little chuckle. "It is rather unfortunate that they miscalculated one point."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "They may have five people, but we have four. Why do we need to feel terror? Why will it be painful?"

Yan Qi: " 'A spear out in the open is easy to dodge; arrows that are concealed are difficult to guard against.' Do you not understand this saying?"

Guo DaLu: "I understand, but I am not afraid."

Yan Qi gave him a fierce look. "What are you afraid of then?"

Guo DaLu: "I'm afraid of you."

Yan Qi could not stop himself from breaking into a captivating smile, but then immediately, he pulled his face into a scowl and turned his head away. In reality, of course he understood what Guo Dalu was saying because he, too, felt the same. For people like them, the only thing they feared was people caring about them and being moved by that care. If you managed to touch their hearts, then even if you asked them to cut off their heads and give it to you, they would not so much as frown.

Guo DaLu: " 'When the army comes, the general will resist; when the water comes in, the earth will be flooded.'
[*Saying that means take things as they happen.] Those sorts of people have nothing remarkable about them. Besides sneakily inflicting harm on people, I think their real capabilities are rather limited." He paused a bit, then added, "The only question now is, when are they coming?"

Wang Dong: "Don't know."

Guo DaLu: "You do not know either?"

Wang Dong: "I only know that, before they pay their last respects to me at my funeral, they will certainly not leave."

With another snicker, Guo DaLu replied, "Right now, it is still difficult to say who will be paying whom last respects."

This was an endearing trait about Guo DaLu: he was always confident in himself, always optimistic. He was the kind of person who would never worry, even if he knew that the sky was going to collapse, because he believed that, so long as a person had confidence, any issue could be resolved. And he not only possessed confidence for himself; at the same time, he passed on confidence to others also.

Wang Dong's face had gradually brightened again. He suddenly declared, "They may be occupying a slightly advantageous position, but I still have ways of dealing with them."

Guo DaLu rushed in to ask, "What type of ways?"

Wang Dong: "Sleep."

Guo DaLu paused for a minute, then broke out in laughter. "You are probably the only person who could think of such a method."

Wang Dong countered, "What is wrong with this method? It is called 'waiting in ease for the exhausted to arrive.' "

Clapping his hands together, Guo DaLu exclaimed, "True. If we must sleep, then we should do it right now. We will rest up and have enough energy to deal with them."

Yan Qi: "If we are to sleep, we must still do it in shifts."

“Correct. You and I will take watch in the first half of the night,” Guo DaLu proposed. “At midnight, we will awaken Wang Laoda and Lin TaiPing.”

Lin TaiPing interrupted them unexpectedly, “That will not work. It will be better if I am on the same shift as you.”

Guo DaLu: “Why?”

As his eyes stole a glance at Yan Qi, Lin TaiPing explained, “The two of you have too much to say to each other. You get so excited while you are chatting that I am worried you will be completely oblivious even if someone is sneaking into the manor.” Abruptly, Yan Qi strode outside because his face had suddenly turned pink.

Guo DaLu insisted, “I still think that it is better if Yan Qi and I are on the same watch. Two people who are chatting and talking will not fall asleep.” As the words were leaving his lips, he was already trailing after Yan Qi. Regardless of what anyone said, he was still adamant that he had to be on the same shift as Yan Qi. There seemed to be a thread connecting the two of them together.

Lin TaiPing watched as they stepped out. With a sudden laugh, he wondered out loud, “Sometimes I really find it quite strange: why is Xiao Guo [Little Guo] so dense?”

Wang Dong was chuckling with him. A little smile was still on his lips as he said, “Do not worry. He will not be for very long.”

Lin TaiPing: “Actually, I hope that he will continue to be dense for a while longer.”

Wang Dong: “Why?”

Lin TaiPing: "Because I find that the way they are right now is rather interesting."

Yan Qi walked into the guest hall and sat down. Guo DaLu, too, walked into the guest hall and sat down.

Starlight shone in through the window and lighted upon Yan Qi's eyes. His eyes were very bright. From the side, Guo DaLu gazed at him. Beaming suddenly, he said, "Did you know that, at times, your eyes look like a girl's?"

Yan Qi drew his face into a pout. "Do I have any other aspects that are like a girl?"

"When you smile, there is a bit of similarity," Guo DaLu giggled.

In a cool tone, Yan Qi asked, "If I am so much like a girl, why do you keep on following me around?"

Grinning, Guo DaLu answered, "If you really were a girl, then I have even more reason to follow you."

Yan Qi turned his head away and rose to his feet. After finding a flint, he lit the lamp on the table. It seemed that he did not dare sit alone with Guo DaLu in the dark. As the lamp glowed, it cast his shadow onto the window. All of a sudden, Guo DaLu reached over and pulled him close, like he wanted to hold him in his arms. "What... what are you doing?" Yan Qi exclaimed.

Guo DaLu: "If you stand there, haven't you just made yourself a live target for that Thousand Hands Thousand Eyes Big Centipede?" His eyes looked around, then suddenly sparkled as he mumbled to himself, "That is a pretty good idea."

Casting an annoyed look at him, Yan Qi snapped, "What great ideas could you possibly come up with?"

Guo DaLu: "Since that Big Centipede likes using projectile weapons on people, we might as well provide him with a few live targets."

Yan Qi's brow creased together. "Who do you intend on getting to be his target?"

"The straw men." He elaborated on his plan, "We will move those straw men into this room and seat them right here. From outside the window, who can tell that they are not real people?" Yan Qi's brow unfurled as he listened to this. Guo DaLu carried on, "Once that Big Centipede sees a human silhouette in the window, his hands will start itching."

Yan Qi: "And then?"

Guo DaLu: "We will be waiting outside. As long as his hands start to itch, we will have ways of dealing with him."

Yan Qi contemplated over it for a short time before asking dully, "Do you really think your idea is a good one?"

Guo DaLu: "Even if it isn't good, we should at least give it a try. We cannot just sit here and wait to die. We should devise a plan to lure them out."

Yan Qi: "Do not forget that those straw men can injure people too."

Guo DaLu: "But no matter what, straw men are lifeless. They should be a little easier to handle than living, breathing people."

With a groan, Yan Qi gave in, "Alright. This time I will do as you say. We will see if this idiotic idea of yours will actually work."

Guo DaLu grinned. "Idiotic ideas are at least a little better than no ideas."

From outside, the straw mens' shadows on the windows really did look quite similar to those of real people. This was because, in addition to being dressed in clothes, these straw people were also wearing hats.

It was deep in the hours of the night. The wind blowing on their bodies was cutting like a knife. Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had hidden themselves in a place that was sheltered from the wind, but they were still shivering from the cold. Out of the blue, Yan Qi said, "It would not feel so cold if we had a little bit of wine to drink right now."

"I did not think you there would be a time when you would want to drink," Guo DaLu remarked with a grin.

Sighing, Yan Qi responded, "It is called, 'those near ink will turn black.' When a person spends every day with a drunkard, sooner or later, he will turn into a drunkard himself."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "And that is why, sooner or later, there will be a day when you no longer hate women."

Yan Qi pulled his face into another scowl and did not say anything else.

After a long while, Guo DaLu piped up again, "I just cannot figure it out: how could someone like Wang Laoda develop an enmity with the Big Centipede and Scarlet Serpent? And that animosity seems so deep."

Yan Qi's tone was frosty. "If you cannot figure it out, don't think about it."

Guo DaLu: "Don't you find it peculiar?"

Yan Qi: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because I never try to probe into other people's secrets, especially if they are my friends' secrets."

Guo DaLu could only respond to that comment with silence.

After a long time had passed, they suddenly heard a "gu" sound. The look on Yan Qi's face changed as he asked, "What is making that noise?"

With a wry smile, Guo DaLu confessed, "It's my stomach." He really was awfully hungry. Another long while passed until they heard a "ge" noise. "What is making the noise this time?"

Yan Qi bit down on his own lip. "It's my teeth." He was so cold his teeth were beginning to chatter.

Guo DaLu: "If you are cold, why don't you huddle a little closer with me?"

Yan Qi: "Shh..."

Guo DaLu: "What is that supposed to mean?"

Yan Qi: "That is telling you to stop making noise. If your mouth keeps talking nonstop, that Big Centipede is not going to show himself."

As expected, Guo DaLu immediately did not dare say anything else. He was not afraid of anything, nor was he

scared that the enemy was coming. His only fear was that they would not come. It was unbearable having to wait like this. The most agonizing part was that no one knew when those people would show up. Perhaps they would have to wait several days, or perhaps it would be in that very instant...

Guo DaLu was reaching over to cover Yan Qi's shoulders with the fishing net he was holding in his hands. The net was light and soft, yet extraordinarily sturdy. They did not know what material it was made of. Lin TaiPing had brought it back with him. Guo DaLu was planning to use it against the Big Centipede – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Although the net was light, Yan Qi's heart was flooded with a warm feeling.

All of a sudden, like an arrow, a shadowy outline flew in from the other side of the wall. As it twisted in midair, the sky was filled with flashes of cold light, and thirty to forty projectile weapons had been fired like a fierce storm through the window.

This person had come in extremely fast; his projectile weapons were even faster. Guo DaLu and Yan Qi could not even see how he had fired them. After unleashing the weapons, his toe touched the ground, and immediately, he was soaring into the air again towards the roof of the house.

His body had just launched back into the air when, out of nowhere, a large net came falling down over his head. He had been flying upwards at the time so it looked as if he was actually throwing himself into the net. In panic, he struggled to free himself, but the net was like the silken threads of a spider entangling around his body.

Guo DaLu could not contain his shout of triumph. "Let's see if you can escape now." Yan Qi had already darted over and

sent a kick towards his “Xue Hai” [Sea of Blood] acupoint.

But then, at that moment, from within the net, more than ten points of cold light came flying out. This time it was Guo DaLu and Yan Qi’s turn to be surprised. In that same instant, a hook flew in from outside the wall and caught onto the net. Obviously, attached to the hook was a rope. And of course, holding onto the rope was a hand. The hand gave a tug and the net was yanked upwards.

When the net was being pulled up, both Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had lunged towards it. However, even though they were simultaneously startled, the projectile weapons were not unleashed on both of them at the same time. All the weapons had, in fact, been fired at Yan Qi.

That is why Guo DaLu was more alarmed and more panicked than Yan Qi. His mind had not yet contemplated what he should do before his body had already dived towards Yan Qi and thrown itself on top of him. The two of them tumbled to the ground.

Guo DaLu felt bursts of stabbing pain all over. Abruptly, his entire body became completely numb. And then, his senses grew numb as well.

And then, his senses grew numb as well.

He did not see the fishing net get pulled off, nor did he see the man inside the net free himself and leap upwards. In his state of semi-consciousness, all he heard was two loud shouts followed by a cry of fear and a cry of anguish. However, he could not discern who had produced that frightened cry and who had let out the anguished cry. He only knew that he definitely had not cried out. That was because his teeth were clenched tightly together.

There are some people who, in normal times, will frequently shout and be noisy, but when they are genuinely in pain, they will not even so much as moan. Guo DaLu was such a person.

There are some people who, when they see their friends in danger, will forget about any danger to themselves. Guo DaLu was also one of these people. And once he was in motion, he paid no attention to his own life.

The cry of fear seemed to slowly fade into the distance so that gradually, he could no longer hear it. But what was that sound? Was that someone weeping?

Guo DaLu opened his eyes. Right away, he saw the tears on Yan Qi's face. When Yan Qi saw his eyes open, he could not help crying out in joy, "You are awake."

Someone to the side immediately said, "Good people do not live long; a blight will stay for a thousand years. I knew that he would not die." It was Wang Dong's voice. His voice was usually emotionless, but now, there was a hint of quivering in it. And then, Guo DaLu saw his face. That cold, detached face was right now filled with joy and elation.

Guo DaLu chuckled. "Did you think that I had died?" He was laughing, but the look on his face was as if he was crying. The instant he laughed, his body was wracked with pain.

Wiping his tears away secretly, Yan Qi instructed, "Lie here quietly. You are not allowed to walk or say anything."

Guo DaLu answered obediently, "Yes."

Yan Qi: "You are not allowed to even say one word."

Guo DaLu nodded.

Yan Qi: "And not allowed to nod your head. Not even allowed to move."

Sure enough, Guo DaLu did not even move a little bit, but his eyes were wide as he stared at Yan Qi.

Yan Qi exhaled a little breath and explained, "You were hit by a 'nail of death,' a sleeve arrow, plus two poisoned needles. This life of yours was basically snatched back from death, so you should cherish it." His eyes grew red again as he spoke.

Wang Dong sighed at him. "If you don't allow him to speak, it may be even more difficult for him to bear."

Guo DaLu: "Correct answer."

Yan Qi glowered at him and snapped, "It seems the right thing to do is sew this guy's lips together."

Guo DaLu: "It is only when I am not talking that I feel pain."

Yan Qi: "No such thing."

Guo DaLu: "Yes there is." He wanted to laugh, but he held it back. He carried on slowly, "Because all I need to do is start talking and I will forget about any pain."

Yan Qi was gazing at him. That expression in his eyes: was it showing feelings of protectiveness and tenderness? Or blame? Or some other emotion that could not be expressed in words or even understood? His complexion was very pale, like the color of the window paper.

The window paper was white again; the sky had brightened. Although the night had been very difficult to endure, it was

at last part of the past.

Guo DaLu could not help asking, "What happened with the Big Centipede?"

Yan Qi: "He has become a dead centipede now." The cry of anguish that Guo DaLu heard had come from him.

However, a centipede may appear to die, but its body may not actually stiffen. Therefore, Guo DaLu pressed further, "Is he really dead? Completely dead?"

Yan Qi did not answer; it was Lin TaiPing who did. "He is completely and thoroughly dead."

Guo DaLu: "It was you who killed him?"

Lin TaiPing shook his head. "It was Yan Qi." With a sudden laugh, he added, "You must not have thought that, even under those circumstances, he would be able to get your revenge for you." Guo DaLu really had not thought that was possible since at the time, he had been lying on top of Yan Qi. He tried to ask Yan Qi, but Yan Qi had already turned his head away. Lin TaiPing carried on, "I did not think that would happen either, but I watched as, just when the Big Centipede leapt up, a dagger pierced his throat. Then I saw the blood on the ground."

Guo DaLu: "There was only blood on the ground? Where was his body?"

Lin TaiPing: "He left, and he took the dagger with him."

Guo DaLu: "A dead person can still walk?"

Lin TaiPing: "Because there was still one last breath left in that person. At most, though, it was just one breath."

The breath that Guo DaLu had been holding was finally released. His face brightening, he said, "So it seems I did not lose out."

Lin TaiPing: "Yes. And now, it is four against four."

With a self-mocking smile, Guo DaLu joked, "Sadly, though, I can only be counted as one half."

Wang Dong suddenly interjected, "They only have three people left."

Lin TaiPing: "Hong NiangZi, Scarlet Serpent, and Cui MingFu [Life-Hastening Talisman]."

Guo DaLu: "Do not forget that there still is that 'Flies, Soaring into the Sky' King of Eagles."

Wang Dong: "I am not able to forget that." His expression had suddenly become very strange, and his eyes seemed to be staring at something far off in the distance.

Guo DaLu counted off, "Hong NiangZi, Scarlet Serpent, and Cui MingFu, plus add in the King of Eagles – is that not exactly four?"

Wang Dong: "Three."

Guo DaLu: "Three plus one. Why is it still three?"

Wang Dong's eyes were empty. Nobody could tell what he was looking at. His face looked as if he was in a trance. Nobody could tell what he was thinking. A long time passed before finally, speaking each word slowly and clearly, he said, "Because I am 'Flies, Soaring in the Sky' King of Eagles."

No one asked about Wang Dong's past because they were ones who respected other people's secrets. If Wang Dong did not volunteer it himself, they would certainly not ask. In the end, Wang Dong's secret was told by Wang Dong himself.

Wang Dong was not born with a dislike for being in motion. In fact, when he was a child, not only did he like moving, he loved it, and he moved about tremendously. By the time he was six years old, he knew how to climb trees. He had climbed all sorts of trees, and therefore, he had also toppled down from all sorts of trees. And he had fallen in all sorts of different positions and forms.

The worst time was when his head had struck the ground first. That time, the fall had nearly split his head in two. It was only when he was starting to be able to hang from a tree like a monkey, using just the tip of his foot, that he no longer climbed trees. That was because tree climbing had turned into something as safe as sleeping under the covers, not the least bit exhilarating.

From that time onward, everyday, his parents had to send out all of the household servants to search for him. Although by then their family fortune had already deteriorated, they still had quite a few servants. Each instance, by the time they managed to find him and bring him home, they were completely exhausted to the point where it seemed a mere poke with the tip of a finger would cause them to topple over.

Yet, he was still frisky, much more vigorous than a shrimp just out of water. After a while, no one was willing to go look for him. They would rather chop eight hundred jin [1 jin (catty) = 0.5 kg] of firewood than find him. They would rather pack up and quit than have to search for him. And so, his father had to abandon that notion and allowed Wang Dong to play outside however long it pleased him.

Fortunately, he would return home once every two to three days, back to bathe, eat, and change his clothes – back to ask for spending money. That was because, at the time, he was still thirteen or fourteen years of age and felt that it was perfectly fine and proper to ask his parents for money.

By the time he was a little older and felt that it was time for himself to be independent, his parents rarely got to see him. His elderly father and mother had lost track of the number of times they had secretly sworn, “Next time he returns, we will lock him up with a metal chain and break his two legs with a club. We will see then whether he can still go out and be wild.” But then, the next time he came home, they saw that he was all filthy, hungry and looking thin and sickly, and the elderly man’s heart would soften.

At most, then, he would just call him into the study for a session of verbal discipline. Furthermore, his mother would have rushed into the kitchen long ago to simmer a chicken soup. Before his father had finished his lecture, a chicken drumstick would have already been stuffed into their son’s mouth.

Perhaps, in this world, only the parents of an only child will understand what they were feeling. Daughters and sons will never be able to comprehend it. Wang Dong was no exception. He only knew that when a man grew up, he should go out and forge his own way in the world. And so, he left to go explore his way outside.

At that time, he was only seventeen, and he was the same as every other seventeen year old youth on the earth. Right after Wang Dong left his family, his heart was brimming with excitement and filled with aspirations. However, after suffering through a couple days of hunger, he slowly started

to get homesick. Then his heart started feeling very empty and lonely.

As a result, he would desperately try to make some new friends – of course, it was best if it was a “powder and rouge” intimate friend [a (pretty) female close friend]. What seventeen year old lad does not yearn for love and fantasize about romance?

It was when he reached a point where he was hopelessly lonely that “Rescuer of the Poor and Needy” Hong NiangZi came into his life. She appreciated his ambitions and understood his misery. She comforted him, encouraged him – encouraged him to do all kinds of things. “A man who is alive on this earth ought to go out and experience things.” To him, everything she said was an imperial decree. “When a person is alive, he must have money and a name for himself because life is for enjoying.”

At the time, he still did not know that there were many other things in life aside from his own pleasures that were much more meaningful. So, in order to become famous, he did not hesitate to do all sorts of things.

He became famous. He had not yet reached twenty when he became the impressively renowned “Flies, Soaring into the Sky” King of Eagles. Becoming famous, indeed, was a very gratifying thing.

Muddle-headedly, he did all sorts of things, and muddle-headedly, he made a name for himself. On his body, he wore the most lavish clothing, and he drank wine that cost three liang of silver for just one jin.

He knew how to nitpick a tailor’s handiwork. If his shark fin soup had been simmered a minute less than it should have been, he would immediately hurl it into the chef’s face. He

not only understood enjoyment, the enjoyments he had were truly quite good.

He should have been very satisfied. But for some reason, he suddenly had feelings of agony and unease, and furthermore, that uneasiness was even worse than before. In the past, once his head touched the pillow, he would sleep very sweetly, but now, he often could not even fall asleep.

In the times he was unable to sleep, he would ask himself, "All those things I have done, should I have done them?" "These friends I have made, are they really true friends?" "Should a person think of other things aside from his own pleasures?" And then, all of a sudden, he began longing for home and missing his father and mother. The most skilful chef in the world cannot simmer out a chicken soup like the ones made by a mother's own hands.

All those words of flattery gradually did not seem as pleasant to listen to as his father's words of discipline. Even hearing Hong NiangZi's sweet words and honeyed phrases did not move his heart like they used to. However, all these things were not the most important point; the most important was that he suddenly wanted to be an honest and upright person, one who could go to sleep with his mind at ease.

As a result, he started to plan his escape to free himself from that type of life and those sorts of friends. He obviously knew that they would definitely not just let him leave because firstly, they needed him, and secondly, he knew too many secrets.

The one fortunate thing was that, all along, he had never mentioned his family or his parents in front of them. He did not know whether he was afraid his parents would lose him or he would lose his parents. His mother and father were not

any sort of extraordinary personage. His friends never inquired about his family background neither; they only asked him, "How did you learn your martial arts?"

His martial arts were learned during the time when he was still a child who was always being unruly outside. A very mysterious old man would wait for him every day in the dark forest and force him to train intensely. From the beginning to the end, he did not know who that old man was, nor did he know how strong the martial art he taught him actually was.

It was not until he had his first fight that he knew. This was his unexpected encounter, and it was both bizarre and mysterious. Hence, he had never mentioned this in front of anyone because even if he did say something, nobody would believe him. At times, he did not even really believe it himself.

End of Chapter 22

Chapter 23 - Hong NiangZi: Heart like a Serpent and Scorpion

Everyone has a past; no one can avoid talking about their past in front of their good friends. Sometimes, it will be like telling a story. Most of these stories are not very captivating – listening to someone boast is not as interesting as doing the boasting yourself. But everything has its exceptions.

When Wang Dong spoke, everyone stared at him with wide eyes while they listened without even interrupting at all. The first person who opened his mouth to interrupt was, naturally, still Guo DaLu. He had, in fact, restrained himself for an awfully long time, but as he listened to this point, he could no longer contain himself. He first exhaled out a long breath before finally asking, “Where did that elderly gentleman wait for you?”

Wang Dong: “In the grove behind the graveyard.”

Guo DaLu: “You went every day?”

Wang Dong: “Regardless of wind or rain, there was not a day that I did not go.”

Guo DaLu: “In total, how many days did you go?”

Wang Dong: “Three years and four months.”

Guo DaLu blew out another lengthy breath of air. “Then that means you went over one thousand times.”

Wang Dong nodded.

Guo DaLu: “From what you said, if you did not learn fast enough, you would suffer a beating, and the beating would

not be a light one.”

Wang Dong: “In the first year, I rarely had instances where I did not get a thrashing.”

Guo DaLu: “If you were beat everyday, why did you still go?”

Wang Dong: “Because at the time, I thought that type of experience was very mysterious and moreover, was fresh and thrilling.”

Guo DaLu pondered over that, then beamed as agreed, “If that was me in your place, I would have gone too.”

Lin TaiPing could not help asking, “You never asked the elderly gentleman for his name?”

Wang Dong: “I asked several hundred times.”

Lin TaiPing: “Did you know where he had come from?”

Shaking his head, Wang Dong replied, “Every time, by the time I arrived, he was already there.”

Lin TaiPing: “Why didn’t you go earlier?”

Wang Dong: “No matter how early I went, he was still there first.”

Guo DaLu raised an eyebrow. “Why did you not follow him and see where he went back to?”

With a wry smile on his face, Wang Dong told him, “Of course I tried.”

Guo DaLu: “And the result?”

Wang Dong: “The result was each time, I would get a brutal beating, and then I would return home obediently.”

Knitting his brow together, Guo DaLu muttered, "He waited everyday for you in that place and forced you to learn martial arts, but he would not let you know who he was."

Wang Dong: "And what was even more bizarre was that he never once asked me who I was."

Guo DaLu sighed, "Such a weird encounter is rare in this world. It seems only a weird person like you could have such weird encounters."

"At the time you were planning to disassociate yourself from them, even Hong Niangzi did not know?" Yan Qi jumped in.

Wang Dong: "I never mentioned anything in front of anybody."

Yan Qi: "But Hong NiangZi... wasn't she quite nice to you?"

The expression on Wang Dong's face grew even uglier than what it had been before. Finally, after a long time had passed, he stated in a cold voice, "She was quite nice to many people."

Yan Qi realized he had asked the wrong thing and immediately changed the subject. "Later, how did you leave them?"

In a detached tone, Wang Dong answered, "One time, they were planning on stealing the manuals that are stored in Shaolin Temple, and they told me to go first to survey the situation there. I seized that opportunity to sneak away."

Exhaling a long breath, Yan Qi said disbelievingly, "These people would actually dare scheme against Shaolin. They have nerve."

Guo DaLu: "After you escaped, they never found you?"

Wang Dong: "No." He suddenly rose to his feet and walked over to the window. The night was very dark, very cold. He stood there by the window, lost in thought for a long time, before finally carrying on, "After I returned here, I rarely went out."

Guo DaLu: "Did you suddenly change and become someone who did not want to move?"

Wang Dong: "I truly did change, and I changed very quickly, changed a lot..." His voice was hoarse and filled with grief as he continued, "Because it was only when I came back that I found out, two years after I had left, my mother..." He did not finish. His hands were clenched tightly into a pair of fists, and his entire body was trembling. He could not continue what he was saying.

This time, even Guo DaLu did not ask; he neither had the heart to ask, nor did he have the need to ask. They all realized what had befallen Wang Dong and understood what he felt in his heart. What had happened when he finally returned, hoping to repay his parents' kindness and love for him and do as a filial son should?

Lin TaiPing's head was lowered; his eyes seemed to be brimming with tears. Guo DaLu's heart was aching and his eyes were a little red. Now he finally knew why Wang Dong had become so poor, so lazy, and so strange: because his heart was filled with sorrow and remorse. He was punishing himself. If you had to say that he was running away, then what he was running away from was certainly not Hong Niangzi or Scarlet Serpent or any other person. He was running away from himself.

As Guo DaLu recalled the first time he saw him lying there on the bed in the dark, allowing the mice to crawl all over his body, he could not hold back his long sigh. Unless a person has completely lost his will to fight, even if he could withstand hunger, he still would not endure the mice. That night, if Guo DaLu had not muddle-headedly barged in and muddle-headedly become his friend, would Wang Dong still be alive this day? Guo DaLu did not dare to even contemplate this question.

At last, Wang Dong turned his head back towards them and said slowly, "It has been nearly three years since I came back. In these three years, they must have been searching for me nonstop."

Forcing a smile onto his face, Guo DaLu remarked, "Of course it would be difficult for them to find you. Who would have ever thought that 'Flies, Soaring into the Sky' King of Eagles would stay in such a place and live such a life?"

Wang Dong: "But I knew all along that, sooner or later, there would be a day when they found me."

Yan Qi blinked at him. "It has been so long already. Why will they not let it drop?"

Guo DaLu: "Have you calculated it out yourself? Do you owe them? Or do they owe you?"

For a long time, Wang Dong was silent. "There are some accounts that will never be worked out clearly," he finally said.

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because everyone has their own way of calculating and every method is different." His expression

grew even grimmer as he carried on in a deliberate tone, "To them, there is only one way to settle this all out."

Yan Qi: "Which way?"

Wang Dong: "You should know which one it is."

Yan Qi did not say anything. He did know. Some accounts could only be settled with blood. A little blood was not enough. Large amounts of blood were required. Blood from you alone would not be sufficient; it needed blood from many people. Yan Qi gazed at the wounds on Guo DaLu's body. After a long time, he said regretfully, "It seems that this account is getting harder and harder to work out. I wonder when it will finally be completely settled."

Wang Dong sighed, "Rest assured; we will not have to wait for very long because..." He closed his mouth suddenly. Everyone's mouths had closed; even their breathing had paused. This was because they had all heard the sound of footsteps. The footsteps were very light and were walking unhurriedly across the snow-covered courtyard.

"Who is coming?"

"Could it be that the time has come to settle the debts?"

Lin TaiPing struggled to pull himself up and rush out the door but then stopped. Guo DaLu pointed at the window; Yan Qi shook his head in reply. There was only one set of footsteps. Right then, this individual was slowly walking up the stone steps to their door. All of a sudden, from outside, someone knocked. This person was actually audacious enough to openly and regally knock on the door. It was something they had never expected.

At last, Wang Dong asked, "Who is it?"

Outside, someone chimed lightly, “Me.”

Wang Dong: “Who are you?”

The person outside suddenly laughed, the sound of her laughter like bells, but much more melodiously clear and enchanting than bells. “You do not even recognize the sound of my voice. You really are a little heartless one.” The visitor was a woman – a woman whose voice was very pleasant to listen to and who seemed to still be very young.

From Wang Dong’s expression, they could deduce who this woman was. Wang Dong’s face was white as paper. Yan Qi patted him lightly on the shoulder and pointed first at the door, then at the back of the room, meaning, “If you do not want to see her, you can go to the back and take cover. I will take care of her for you.” Wang Dong certainly understood his intent, but he shook his head. He understood his own plight much better than anyone else. He had already retreated to the last step possible. It meant that he could retreat no further and moreover, he did not want to retreat.

“Why have you not come to open the door yet?”

None of the others had ever seen Hong NiangZi in person, but anyone who heard her voice could imagine how enchanting a woman she was.

“Is it because there is another woman in the room and you are afraid I will see her? You should know that I do not like to drink vinegar [* get jealous] like you do.”

Abruptly, in large steps, Wang Dong strode over, then stopped again. “The door is not locked,” he said in a low voice.

With a light push, the door had opened. A person stood outside the doorway as she welcomed the lamplight that

shone out from the room. All the light seemed to converge on her; all their eyes, of course, were focused on her. She seemed to radiate a glow from her body – a glow that was so red it dazzled the eyes, so red it could make the heart beat faster.

Naturally, the garments Hong NiangZi [Red Lady] wore on her body were red, but the glow did not seem to come from her clothing. As a matter of fact, besides her clothes, every part of her body seemed to glow, especially her eyes and her dimples.

Each one of them felt that her eyes were on him, that she was smiling right at him. If a smile really had the magical power to bring down a city wall, it undoubtedly would be the same type of smile as hers.

Yan Qi shifted his body unintentionally, or perhaps intentionally, so that it obstructed Guo DaLu's view. No matter what, if he could prevent his friend from seeing this woman's captivating smile, then it would be the best thing to do. Shouldn't every person make sure his friends have distanced themselves from sin?

Her gaze floated over them. Unexpectedly, she exclaimed, "Why must you men all have that d*mn, frigging look...?"

This was the first sentence she said. At this point, she paused a moment, as if she was deliberately allowing the words, "d*mn frigging" to leave a slightly deeper impression on these men's minds. She seemed to know that the men in this house enjoyed using those words and also liked hearing them. From her lips, though, these words seemed to carry a particular feel.

In that moment that she had paused, there was someone who could not restrain his curiosity. "What look do we men

have?" The voice had come from behind Yan Qi. Yan Qi could block Guo DaLu's eyes, but he could not obstruct his ears, nor could he stuff up his mouth.

Hong NiangZi: "Why is it that every time you see a woman, it is as if you have seen a ghost, and you do not even dare to let out a fart?" She wrinkled her nose, and the smile that Yan Qi did not want Guo DaLu to see appeared on her face.

Softly, she added, "There should at least be one person amongst you who will invite me inside first." In reality, she had not even finished this comment before she was already inside the room. Every person there knew who she was and what she was there to do. Seeing her walk in should have made them enraged and tense.

However, Yan Qi suddenly sensed that as Guo DaLu and Lin TaiPing looked at her, not only did their eyes not contain any hatred or nervousness, they in fact seemed to carry a smile. Even Yan Qi, himself, was wavering slightly and was a bit uncertain. In his mind, Hong NiangZi should not be someone like this.

Ever since she had said "d*mn, frigging," the atmosphere inside the room seemed to have shifted and people's impression of her had completely changed. A devilish seductress who was venomous like a snake and scorpion should not speak in such a manner. Only now did Yan Qi discover that her arms were carrying a food basket.

She plopped the basket heavily onto the table and removed her hands lightly before letting out a little breath. "A woman just carried such a heavy basket and walked for half a shi chen [1 shi chen = 2 hours] just to bring something to all of you. Her arms are so tired they could snap. Do all of you not even have a little bit of gratitude toward her?"

Wang Dong's voice was icy as he stated, "No one asked you to bring anything here. In fact, nobody wants you here."

It was only then that Hong NiangZi glanced at him from the corner of her eye. She seemed to be angry, yet not really angry, smiling, yet not really smiling. Gnawing on her lip, she addressed him, "Let me ask you: are these people your friends?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

With a faint sigh, she said, "You can watch your friends suffer from hunger, but I cannot."

Wang Dong: "Whether they are suffering from hunger or not does not concern you."

Hong NiangZi: "Why should it not concern me? Your friends are also my friends. As their dasao [eldest brother's wife], how can I just watch as my brothers endure hunger?"

Yan Qi could not help butting in, "Who is Dasao?"

Hong NiangZi giggled, "You are all Wang Laoda's good friends. How could you not know who Wang Dasao is?"

Lifting up the cloth that was covering the basket, she said charmingly, "Today Dasao is treating. You do not need to be polite. If you do not eat, then you are just pointlessly not eating."

Yan Qi: "And if we eat?"

"Then you are pointlessly eating," she laughed in reply.

Yan Qi looked at her. The expression on his face was like he had just been slapped.

After a long while, she turned to face Wang Dong. “Do all of you believe that the stuff I brought has been poisoned?”

Wang Dong: “Yes.”

Hong NiangZi: “And I not only want to poison other people, I also want to poison you?”

Wang Dong: “Yes.”

Hong NiangZi’s eyes grew red. Whipping her head around suddenly, she grabbed a chicken drumstick from out of the basket. Her voice was hoarse as she demanded, “If that is so, the chicken drumstick must have poison inside?”

Wang Dong: “Very likely.”

Hong NiangZi: “Fine... fine...” She took a bite out of the drumstick and swallowed. Snatching up a pitcher of wine, she challenged, “Inside the wine, is there also poison?”

Wang Dong: “Also very likely.”

Hong NiangZi: “Fine.” She took a drink of the wine as well. Basically, she consumed one mouthful of anything that was in the basket before she lifted her head and, with wide eyes, challenged Wang Dong, “Now what do you think?”

Wang Dong did not even think before answering instantly, “Still the same as before.”

Hong NiangZi: “You still think they are poisoned?”

Wang Dong: “Yes.”

Her tears were about to spill over, but she forced herself to hold them back. A long time went by until she nodded her head slowly and said dejectedly, “I know what you are thinking.”

Wang Dong: "You should have known long ago."

Hong NiangZi: "You believe I had taken the antidote first before I came?"

Wang Dong: "Hmph."

Her voice was anguished. "All along, you have believed that I am a woman whose heart is more venomous than a serpent or scorpion, and you still think that the reason I have been kind to you is only because I want to use you." As her words reached this point, she, at last, could not stop her tears from flowing.

As they listened to this point, their lips did not say anything, but Guo DaLu and Lin TaiPing's hearts, which had already been softened long ago, were starting to feel that the way Wang Dong was treating her really was rather unreasonable. No matter what, in the past, they had once had feelings for another. If it had been Guo DaLu in his place, he may have already taken her into his arms by now.

But there still was not even a trace of expression on Wang Dong's face. This man's heart practically seemed to be forged of iron.

They watched as Hong NiangZi took every item she had pulled out and slowly placed them one at a time back into the basket again. Biting her lip, she told Wang Dong, "Fine. If you think they are poisoned, I will take them and leave."

Wang Dong: "It would be best if you hurried up and took them away."

Hong NiangZi's body was quivering, and with a tremble her voice, she said, "If you believe that all along, I have always

acted with bad intentions toward you, then I will never come here to see you again."

Wang Dong: "You never should have come in the first place."

Hong NiangZi: "I... I only want to ask you one thing..." She suddenly rushed right up in front of Wang Dong, and demanded in a hoarse voice, "Let me ask you: ever since you met me, did I ever do a single thing that has wronged you?"

Wang Dong suddenly could not speak.

Hong NiangZi had clenched her hands tightly into fists, but she still could not stop her entire body from shaking as she rasped, "It is true; I really am not a good person. I really have brought harm to many men. But what I feel for you... When did I ever harm you? Tell me. Tell me."

"There is nothing for us to say to each other now," Wang Dong responded, his tone cold.

She was silent for a long while, then slowly nodded her head once again as she sadly said, "Fine. I'll leave. I'll leave... You can rest assured. This time, after I leave, I will never come back again to find you." She turned around deliberately, picked up her basket, then walked out slowly.

Guo DaLu stared at the outline of her lonely and fragile back, watched her gradually head towards that cold and dark courtyard... The wind was blowing very hard in the courtyard, swirling up the flakes of snow that had accumulated. In the blink of an eye, the wind had scattered those flakes, blown them away completely.

Would she also be like the snow, blown apart in the blink of an eye, completely blown away? Guo DaLu felt an aching in his heart. His only wish was that Wang Dong's heart would

soften and would allow this poor woman to stay. But Wang Dong's heart seemed to be cast of iron. He watched with open eyes as she walked outside, not a trace of emotion on his face.

Guo DaLu stared as she crossed over the threshold, nearly unable to bear it and wanting to ask for Wang Dong for her to stay.

All of a sudden, Hong NiangZi's body twitched, like she had been whipped unexpectedly. Then, she collapsed. The instant she hit the ground, her four limbs had already convulsed together. That pale face had turned a dark purple color, her eyes had rolled backwards, and her mouth was spewing out white foam. The foam had traces of blood inside.

Yan Qi's face transformed rapidly as he exclaimed, "The food she brought really was poisoned."

Yan Qi's face transformed rapidly as he exclaimed, "The food she brought really was poisoned."

Guo DaLu rushed in to point out, "But she, herself, definitely did not know; otherwise, why would she be poisoned too?"

But Wang Dong still stood there like a stone statue, not moving at all, as if he did not even see any of this.

Even Yan Qi was slightly anxious and he could not help blurting out, "Wang Laoda, no matter what, you should first go take a look at her..."

Wang Dong: "Look at what?"

Yan Qi: "Look and see what type of poison she has ingested. Can she still be saved?"

Wang Dong: “Not worth looking at.”

Unable to contain himself, Guo DaLu yelled, “What is wrong with you? How can you not even have a bit of humanity in you?” If Yan Qi had not been holding him down, he would have been trying to pull himself up already.

They watched as Hong NiangZi continued to convulse and gasp incessantly, but she still was calling out continuously, “Wang Dong.... Wang Dong...”

At last, Wang Dong could not help himself and let out a lengthy sigh. “I am here.”

Hong NiangZi was struggling to stretch out her hand. “You... come here... please...”

Gritting his teeth together, Wang Dong answered, “If you have anything you would like to say, I am here listening.”

Hong NiangZi: “I did not know... truly did not know that stuff was poisoned. I really did not come here to harm you... you... you must believe me.”

Wang Dong had not yet replied before Guo DaLu could not restrain himself from loudly shouting, “I believe you. We all believe you.”

She gave a sorrowful smile. “Scarlet Serpent and the others think that you have wronged them. Even though they want to come kill you, I... I never had that idea.” Her knees were drawn to her chest. Her clothes were already soaked with cold sweat and she struggled to continue, “I may not be a good woman, but to you, I have always been true and sincere. As long as you understand my feelings, even if I... I should die, I will do so willingly...” After finishing the last sentence, she seemed to have used up the last of her strength so that she could not even struggle.

Guo DaLu was clenching his teeth as he demanded, "If you heard that, why are you still standing there not moving?"

Wang Dong: "How should I be moving?"

Guo DaLu: "She has become this way all because of you. Can you not think of a way to save her?"

Wang Dong: "How do you think I should save her?"

Lin TaiPing suddenly interrupted, "If you could neutralize the venom from the weapons that struck Xiao Guo, you should be able to neutralize her poison."

Shaking his head, Wang Dong replied slowly, "That was different, completely different."

Guo DaLu: "What is different?"

Wang Dong suddenly was silent again. Although, with difficulty, he was keeping control of himself, his eyes seemed to show the light of tears. Those were not just tears of sorrow but also seemed to be tears filled with rage. His fingers were trembling.

Yan Qi mulled, "If even Wang Laoda cannot cure her of the poison, then there is only one person in the world who can."

Guo DaLu: "Who?"

Yan Qi: "Scarlet Serpent."

Guo DaLu: "That's right. We should go demand the antidote from Scarlet Serpent."

Yan Qi heaved a sigh. "I am afraid that will be very hard to do." Demanding the antidote from Scarlet Serpent was

basically as difficult as making a tiger skin his own coat off. Naturally, Guo DaLu understood this idea.

The sound of Hong NiangZi's gasping was gradually growing weaker, but she still continued to call out Wang Dong's name faintly. "Wang Dong.... Wang Dong...."

Guo DaLu was heartbroken as he listened to the sound of her voice get quieter and quieter. Unable to hold himself back again, he yelled, "If none of you can save her and you are not willing to get the antidote from Scarlet Serpent, then are you just going watch like this as she dies in front of you? Are you all even human?"

Sighing another time, Yan Qi asked him, "Then what do you think we should do?"

Guo DaLu: "Even Scarlet Serpent would not just watch as she dies from poison. You guys..."

The whole time, Lin TaiPing had been sitting there staring off into the distance, but now, he cut in and declared loudly. "That is right. Scarlet Serpent will definitely not just watch as she dies, so we should first take her back." Although this plan was not a good one, it could be considered the only plan out of no possible plans.

With knit brows, Yan Qi stated, "The question is, who will bring her back?"

Guo DaLu: "Hmph." Though he did not say anything, he was staring at Wang Dong from the corner of his eye. Of course it should be Wang Dong who took her back. If he even had a tiny bit of conscience left, he should not just watch as she died there.

But Wang Dong did not show any trace of reaction, as if he did not understand what they were saying, or as if he was an

idiot. Naturally, Wang Dong was not an idiot. He was pretending to be stupid.

Once again, Guo DaLu could not control himself and hollered out, "Fine. None of you are going to take her back; I will take her back." Using the most strength he had ever used in his life, he jumped to his feet. Yan Qi immediately wrapped his arms tightly around him.

Wang Dong turned his head to look at them. His eyes were filled with sorrow and pity. Nobody knew what he was actually thinking in his heart. After a long time, he finally stomped his foot and announced, "Alright. I will bring her back." He turned his head back and was going to pick up Hong NiangZi.

All of a sudden, like an arrow, Lin TaiPing dashed over and forcefully ran into him, knocking him back seven or eight feet so that he fell into the corner of the wall. In that instant, Lin TaiPing had already picked up Hong NiangZi. The look on Wang Dong's face changed rapidly and he cried, "What are you trying to do?"

Lin TaiPing cut off his words. "Only I can bring her back. Yan Qi needs to take care of Xiao Guo. You are a nail in her eye. If you go, they will not let you off so easily." His lips were still speaking as he walked outside.

Wang Dong leapt to his feet and rushed over toward him, shouting loudly, "Hurry and put her down. Hurry..."

Amidst the shouting, Lin TaiPing suddenly cried out in alarm. That Hong NiangZi, who had been gasping her last breath, all of a sudden shot up from his arms like a poisonous serpent. With a somersault in midair, she had flown out three zhang [3 zhang = 10 ft], and in the blink of an eye, she had faded into the darkness. All they heard was her

chime-like laughter resonating back from a distance.

“B**stard surnamed Wang! You watch the dying but you refuse to rescue. You truly have a callous heart. You are not a good person.” When she spoke this last sentence, she was already far away. All that was left was that laughter, clearer than the sound from silver bells and more pleasing to the ear, floating on the wind.

Such a cold wind.

Silver bells that could absorb the soul.

Lin TaiPing was crumpled on the snow-covered ground. On his chest, there was now a dark spot of blood.

No one moved. No one spoke. Even the last traces of that sweet laughter were blown away by the cold wind.

They did not know how much time had passed before Wang Dong finally walked over slowly and picked up Lin TaiPing. His expression was colder than the wind, darker than the night.

Guo DaLu’s tears were falling. Yan Qi was looking at him and his face was covered with tears also. In a gentle voice, he comforted, “Do not be grieved. This cannot be blamed on you.” Things were still fine before he said this, but once he said it, how could Guo DaLu hold it back? How could he bear it? He all of a sudden broke down and started weeping like a child.

Another unknown amount of time passed until Wang Dong slowly lifted his head. “He is not dead yet.”

Yan Qi was stunned and thrilled at the same time as he blurted out, “He can still be saved?”

Wang Dong nodded.

Yan Qi: "What must be done in order to save him?" Once he said this, the expression on his face changed again. This was because he suddenly comprehended. There was only one method in the entire world that could save Lin TaiPing – the most terrible method. He gazed at Wang Dong, unable to control the fear from showing in his eyes, because he knew what Wang Dong was thinking.

Wang Dong certainly knew what Yan Qi was thinking. His face, surprisingly, was very calm as he said without emotion, "You should know what has to be done to save him."

Yan Qi shook his head forcefully. "That method will not work."

Wang Dong: "It will."

Yan Qi's voice was loud. "Absolutely will not."

Wang Dong: "Even if it will not work, it still has to work because we are in a position where we have no other choice."

Yan Qi suddenly collapsed, falling into a chair. He seemed unable to carry on.

Guo DaLu was staring at them with wide eyes, his face still streaked with tears. He could not help asking, "Which method are you two talking about?"

No one answered him; no one even opened their mouths.

Guo DaLu asked in angst, "Why won't you tell me?"

Yan Qi breathed a light sigh. "Even if you know, it is no use," he answered.

Guo DaLu: "Why would there be no use? If I had not come up with some stupid idea, Lin TaiPing would not be like this now. I am in more anguish than anyone else, and more anxious to save him than anyone else."

In a cold voice, Wang Dong said, "You are only able to save one person right now."

Guo DaLu: "Who?"

Wang Dong: "Yourself."

"The injuries you sustained were not light," Yan Qi told him gently. "If you let your mind wander to foolish thoughts, I am afraid you will not even be able to preserve your own life."

Guo DaLu glared at them. He suddenly asked, "Were the weapons that struck me poisoned?"

Yan Qi: "Uh huh."

Guo DaLu: "Who saved me?"

Yan Qi: "Wang Laoda."

Guo DaLu: "Since Wang Laoda was able to cure my poison, why can he not cure Lin TaiPing's?" Yan Qi refused to open his mouth to answer. Guo DaLu continued to press, "The poison on their projectile weapons should be of the same type, right?"

Yan Qi was quiet for another long period of time. At last, he exhaled a lengthy sigh. "Why must you ask until everything is so clear?"

Guo DaLu snapped back loudly, "Why can I not ask until things are clear? If you guys do not tell me, I will... I will..."

He smacked the bedcovers fiercely, so angry that he could not speak.

With clenched teeth, Yan Qi relented, "Alright. I will tell you. The venom that was used to poison you and Lin TaiPing is truly one that belongs solely to Scarlet Serpent, and so, only his special antidote can cure it."

Guo DaLu: "But Wang Laoda..."

Yan Qi: "When Wang Laoda was planning on separating himself from them, he secretly hid away some of Scarlet Serpent's special antidote in preparation for any eventuality."

Guo DaLu: "Where is the antidote?"

Speaking each word deliberately, Yan Qi replied, "It was completely used up while saving you."

"Completely used up?" Guo DaLu exclaimed.

Yan Qi: "Not even a bit was left." Gnawing on his lip, he continued, "That antidote was supposed to be used to save himself, but he used it all to save you. I had originally thought that he had kept some, but he was worried that your poisoning was too severe and the antidote portion was not enough, so..." As he reached this point, his eyes grew red and he could speak no further. Only he knew this because at the time, Lin TaiPing had been standing guard outside.

Guo DaLu's hands were balled up into two fists. Beads of sweat the size of soy beans were dripping over his face. After a long while, he finally muttered, "I am the one who harmed Lin TaiPing. The only bit of antidote that could save him was used up by me. I really have my ways; I am so amazing."

Yan Qi stated sadly, "This is something nobody could have thought of. You did not ask us to..."

His voice raspy, Guo Dalu interrupted, "That is right. I did not ask you to save me. You guys insisted on doing it that way. But why did you never think about the fact that this way, I will not be able to continue living with an unburdened heart?"

Wang Dong's face hardened. "You have no choice but to continue living. Since I have already saved you, even if you want to die, you will not be permitted to."

Guo DaLu: "But Lin TaiPing..."

In a quiet voice, Wang Dong cut him off, "You do not need to worry about him. If I can save you, then of course I have ways to save him."

Guo DaLu grit his teeth together. "I now finally know what method you are going to use save him."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "You are going to go ask Scarlet Serpent for the antidote, right?" With his jaw clenched tightly, he added, "You were not willing to go before only because you know Hong NiangZi too well. But now, for Lin TaiPing, even if you had to give your own life in exchange for the antidote, you would still insist on going."

There was an indifferent smile on Wang Dong's face as he responded, "Do you really think that 'Flies, Soaring into the Sky' King of Eagles is such a good person?"

Guo DaLu: "I do not know any King of Eagles. I only know Wang Dong, and I am also very aware of what sort of person Wang Dong is."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

The sparkle of tears could be seen in Guo DaLu's eyes. "This person, Wang Dong's face always appears to be cold and hard, but in reality, his heart is softer than tofu and hotter than fire."

Wang Dong was silent. At last, he said softly, "Since you really understand me, then you should know that if I want to do something, nobody will be able to stop me."

Guo DaLu: "You should know me very well too. When I want to do something, nobody can stop me either."

Wang Dong: "What do you want to do?"

Guo DaLu: "Go get the antidote from Scarlet Serpent."

The look on Yan Qi's face changed and he protested, "How can you go?"

Guo DaLu: "I must go, and furthermore, only I can go."

Yan Qi: "But your wounds..."

Guo DaLu: "It is because I am wounded that there is even more reason you should let me go." He did not let anyone speak and carried on, "We only have two people left now. Two people to handle three of them is arduous enough already, so you guys must not get injured too. Otherwise, it will only be the road of death for all of us."

Yan Qi: "These words are logical, but..."

Guo DaLu cut off what he was saying. "But we absolutely cannot watch as Lin TaiPing dies from the poison. Therefore, you really can only let me go, since I am hurt already and cannot help out in any way. In addition..." He chuckled

lightly before continuing, "Scarlet Serpent and those others at least are still human beings. They would not strike a vicious blow to someone who does not even have the strength to defend himself."

Wang Dong gave a cold smirk. "You think they will not kill you?"

Guo DaLu: "I think they likely will not."

Wang Dong: "Do you understand them or do I?"

Guo DaLu: "You."

Wang Dong: "Then I will tell you: there is only one type of person they will not kill."

Guo DaLu: "What type?"

Wang Dong: "A dead person."

Suddenly, the sound of laughter that was like silver bells was carried in on the wind. Yan Qi dashed out and saw a light yellow kite floating down slowly from the sky. The kite was a four-sided shape and drawn on it with a bright red brush were some curvy symbols.

Now Yan Qi knew that this was not a kite, but rather, was a "life hastening" talisman that meant your funeral was coming shortly after you saw it. No one could read what was written on the talisman. Only someone who had been to hell before could understand it.

Wang Dong could understand it.

That light yellow kite was covered with bright red talisman charms. The red was like blood, like the fire in hell. Wang

Dong stared intently at it. He could not stop a look of fear from showing within his cold gaze.

Yan Qi did not look at the kite; his gaze was fixated on Wang Dong's eyes. Although he did not comprehend the meaning of those charms, he could comprehend that look in Wang Dong's eyes. He could not help asking, "What is written on it?"

Wang Dong was quiet for a long time. He still had not given an answer, but instead, pushed open the window and stared out into the dim light of the night sky. The stars were gradually becoming sparse; the night was approaching its end. In the ashen light of the night, there was another kite slowly rising up.

Wang Dong breathed a slight sigh. "The sky will be bright soon."

Yan Qi: "The sky will definitely be bright again."

Wang Dong: "And I definitely must go."

Yan Qi's face went pale. "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because if I am not able to hurry to the spot beneath that kite before daybreak, Lin TaiPing will die."

The sky was going to be light soon.

Dawn usually brought to people brightness, joy, and hope. But now, what it brought for Wang Dong and the others was only death.

"Before daybreak, if Wang Dong is not standing beneath the kite waiting, Lin TaiPing will die." That was the meaning

behind the symbols on the talisman. It was saying Wang Dong had no choice but to go, no choice but to die.

Guo DaLu cried out, "I told you already that only I can go. Nobody even think about trying to stop me."

Wang Dong's voice was distant. "Fine. You can go, but regardless of whether you go or not, I still must go."

Guo DaLu: "Since I am going, why do you still need to go?"

Wang Dong: "Because the person they want is me, not you."

Yan Qi rushed in to point out, "Even if you go, they may not give you the antidote. You should understand this even better than I do."

Wang Dong: "I understand."

Yan Qi: "This is just their ploy to 'entice the soldier.' It is only trap. They have undoubtedly set up an ambush there and are just waiting for you to bite the hook."

Wang Dong: "I also understand this point more than you do."

Yan Qi: "But you still insist on going?"

Wang Dong: "You want me to just watch as Lin TaiPing dies?"

Lin TaiPing's breathing had grown weak already. His teeth were grit tightly and his face was starting to show an aura of death. Anyone could tell that he was not far away from death.

In a gloomy tone of voice, Yan Qi said, "We cannot watch him die, but we also cannot watch as you send yourself into death."

Wang Dong's smile was nonchalant as he asked, "How do you know for sure that I am sending myself to die? Maybe I will return very quickly with the antidote?"

Yan Qi gave him a fierce look. "Are you trying to deceive us or deceive yourself?"

Wang Dong finally heaved a sigh. "I know that the hope of being able to come back here is not a big one, but as long as there is even a bit of hope, I will go."

Yan Qi: "What if there is not even a bit of hope?"

Wang Dong: "I will still go." The way he said this sentence was resolute and decisive. There was no leeway for him turn back.

Yan Qi suddenly rose to his feet and declared loudly, "Alright, you go. I will go with you."

Wang Dong nodded his head slowly. "Yes, you come too. Those who can go should go and leave those who are not able to move right here to wait for people to come slaughter them."

Yan Qi could not speak.

"Then what is it you want us to do?" Guo DaLu blurted. Why don't you just say it out clearly?"

Wang Dong: "I go alone; you guys bring Lin TaiPing down the mountain and wait for me."

Guo DaLu: "And then?"

Wang Dong: "And then you think of a way to get a carriage. Regardless of whether you have to steal or rob, you must get ahold of one."

Guo DaLu: “And then?”

Wang Dong: “And then you will sit inside the carriage and wait. If the sun sets and I still have not come to find you, then you will hurry and get out of this place.”

Guo DaLu: “And after we get out of here, where do we go?”

Wang Dong smiled; it was a rather dismal sort of smile. “The world is big; what places are there that you cannot go?”

Guo DaLu was nodding his head slowly now, too. “Yes. Good plan. You should get credit for thinking up such plan!”

Wang Dong: “It may not be a good plan, but it is the only plan we have.”

Guo DaLu: “Very nice. You are risking your life for Lin TaiPing, but you are allowing us to be like dogs and flee with our tails between our legs. You are a good friend, but you want us to be animals.”

Wang Dong’s face hardened. “Do you have some other idea?”

Guo DaLu: “I only have one.”

Wang Dong: “Say it.”

Guo DaLu: “If we live, then we will all live together happily. If we die, then we will also die together cheerfully.”

Guo DaLu was Guo DaLu. He was not Wang Dong, nor was he Yan Qi. Perhaps he did not have Wang Dong’s calm and composure, and maybe he did not have Yan Qi’s resourcefulness and intelligence. But he was d*mn frigging frank, and he had d*mn frigging guts.

When the wind blew, the cold, ash-colored fog rose up from remote areas. The ghost light had disappeared inside that fog.

Who said that there were no ghosts in this world? Who said?

Right at that very moment, floating in the fog, was that not a roving soul that even hell had refused to take in? Nobody could see his face clearly. That was because his face was also the color of cold ashes. He seemed to have become one with this dreary and hazy fog. His nose had melded into the mist; his lips had also melded into the mist. All that was left was that pair of eyes that looked like ghost lights.

There was no light in those eyes, and you could not distinguish between white and dark parts of it, yet they were filled with a malicious quality, as if they were cursing every matter in the world, every person.

No matter where the gaze of these eyes touched, that place seemed to immediately be tainted by an ominous fate. Right then, those eyes were slowly surveying all directions. Every secluded area, every flake of snow that had collected, he did not let a single one slip by his gaze.

And then, the faint trace of a smile was seen in his eyes. No one could ever imagine how vicious that smile actually was, how frightful.

At that moment, laughter like the chime of silver bells rang from within the fog – not silver bells, but bells that absorbed the soul. Hong NiangZi materialized from that dense fog like an apparition and, with a smile, said, “Everything is all ready?”

The wandering soul nodded his head slowly. “Unless he does not come. If he comes, he has no hope of going back alive.”

Hong NiangZi's eyes were sparkling as she asked, "Do you think he will come?"

Wandering soul: "What do you say?"

She blinked at him. "Why must I be the one to say?"

Wandering soul: "You understand him better than I do."

Smilingly, she walked over towards him and looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Are you sipping vinegar [jealous]?"

Wandering soul: "Hmph! "

Hong NiangZi: "Do you really think I am interested in him?"

That malicious look in his eyes grew even stronger as he spat, "When he was around, you never even spent one day with me."

Hong NiangZi: "Have you already forgotten who told me to do it?"

The wandering soul did not answer.

Hong NiangZi's smile was chilly as she reminded, "In order to win him over, you told me to go sleep with him, but now, you are turning around and blaming me. Do you have a conscience?"

Wandering soul: "No."

HongNiangZi giggled, "I never thought that, once in a while, you would speak the truth."

Wandering soul: "And you?"

Hong NiangZi: "In front of you, all my words are true."

Wandering soul: "If I did not tell you to go sleep with him, would you not have done it?"

Hong NiangZi: "I still would have."

Wandering soul: "Why?"

In a captivating voice, she stated, "Because I am fond of sleeping with men."

Through clenched teeth, he questioned, "What type of men do you like to sleep with?"

Hong NiangZi: "Besides you, I like any type of men." That malicious look in his eyes had transformed into one of pain, but his eyes unexpectedly lit up. As Hong NiangZi looked into his eyes, she asked him, "Are you done with your questions?"

Suddenly, he seized her by the hair and, with a backhand swipe, slapped her hard across the face while he rasped, "You cheap b**ch."

Hong NiangZi was neither frightened nor angry but rather, smiled even more sweetly. "I have always been a cheap b**ch, but you are even cheaper than me." The wandering soul slapped her again. Her smile did not cease. "You not only like it when I go sleep with other men, you also like to ask me and ask me everyday. I have lost track of the number of times you have asked me these same words." Without allowing him to speak, she continued, "It is because you like those words. You like being tortured by me. Only in times that I am torturing you are you a human and are you happy."

With a low growl in his throat, the wandering soul pulled her roughly towards him.

Hong Niang Zi chortled, "You want to again...?"

All of a sudden, they heard someone coldly cut her off, "Now is not the time for flirtatious and teasing banter." That voice was so cold it was like ice. That was because it was coming from beneath the accumulated snow.

"It turns out he is already inside the snow," Hong NiangZi laughed. A face suddenly emerged from the snow – a face even more frightening than that of a corpse. Hong NiangZi addressed the face, "How is it down there?"

Scarlet Serpent replied, "Very nice and cool."

Hong NiangZi giggled, "It is rather difficult to find a place in this world that is more pleasantly cool than there."

Scarlet Serpent: "Did you want to burrow in here and have a sleep with me too?"

Hong NiangZi: "As long as you wait patiently inside there, I will come in sooner or later."

The wandering soul gave a chilly laugh as he said, "Too bad he has no appetite for you."

Scarlet Serpent glanced up at the sky, then pointed out quickly, "The time is getting late. You should hurry up and die."

Wandering soul: "Do you think he may not come?"

Hong NiangZi: "He will."

Wandering soul hurriedly asked, "Why is that?"

Hong NiangZi: "Because besides you, he treats all his friends quite well."

The wandering soul lifted his head to look at the sky also. The dawn sky had already turned white. It was time for all the lonely souls and drifting ghosts of the world to go back. "I am going to die now."

Hong NiangZi: "Hurry up and go die then."

Walking slowly over towards the front of a neglected grave, the wandering soul took out a porcelain bottle and placed it on the burial mound. And then, he suddenly disappeared into the grave.

Hong NiangZi breathed out a very long sigh and murmured, "If he would stay in there forever, that would be so nice."

Scarlet Serpent: "Why?"

She lowered her head and gazed at him, her eyes teary and her voice gentle. "Is it not nice that there is only the two of us here?"

Scarlet Serpent's response was cold: "That will have to wait until all the other women in the world are dead before we talk about it."

She tore over to him, spat into his face, and sputtered hatefully, "Are you human?"

With a wicked smile, he answered, "No." Then, before he had finished, that face had already disappeared back into the snow.

Hong NiangZi was still for a while, like she had matters troubling her heart. After much time had passed, her body flew up into the sky and immediately faded away into the fog.

When the wind blew by, that dense fog that was the color of cold ashes seemed to make the earth grow hazy. The heavens and the earth were all ash-colored. Desolate. Cold snow. There was no one; there was not even a ghost. All that remained was a single kite drifting slowly downward. Not a kite – it was the talisman charm of the life-hastening ghost.

The kite was down. The heavens were covered in grayish-white; nothing could be seen.

WangDong was strolling unhurriedly down the road. His face still did not carry a trace of emotion on it. Even if there was fear in his heart, it would never show on his face. No matter who it may be, if a person experienced the pain and torment that he had experienced, then that person would also learn how to store his emotions in his heart – all sorts of feelings would get stored. Feelings, though, are like wine. The deeper and longer you store them, the stronger and more intense they will become

Right now, he was alone. Naturally, his friends had not come along. Did they desert him, or was he able to convince them? No one knew. No one was able to tell from the look on his face. But everyone knew that ‘there is no banquet in the world that will not come to an end.’ Regardless of how good friends you may be, sooner or later, there will be a time when you will have to part your ways. In life, gatherings are impermanent and ever-changing. Whether it be coming together or moving apart, why should you take it to heart?

The sky was hazy, but at least there was now light. And though he was walking slowly, at least he had reached his destination. Life is like this also; many things are like this. Why should you be so rushed?

The wind was still very cold, cold like a blade slicing into his face. He walked slowly through that desolate graveyard,

silently counting the number of tombstones. Some of them were toppled over; some had been eroded away by the wind and snow so that the characters on them were no longer discernible. Who lay inside these graves? There was no longer anyone who cared. When they were alive, did they not also have their own times of glory and shame, joy and sorrow? Yet now, they had nothing. So then, why should you always place thoughts of life and death, honor and shame on your mind?

Wang Dong gave a faint sigh, but then, his footsteps suddenly ceased. It was because he could hear the sound of Hong NiangZi's laughter.

With her silver bell-like laughter, she chimed, "I had known that you would come, and now you have come."

Wang Dong: "I have come." He had spotted her already, standing beneath a snow-covered, leafless tree, still dressed in bright red garments, almost like the first time he had laid eyes on her. But time that has slipped away will not come back, and happiness and sorrows that have passed will fade from memory – even if they are not yet forgotten, sooner or later, they will fade.

Hong NiangZi stood in that place staring at him. In her eyes, was that anger? Resentment? Love? Hate? At last, she smiled. "You really did come for the purpose of getting the antidote for Lin TaiPing?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

She was biting her lip. "For me, you were not willing to come?"

Wang Dong: "Not willing."

The sound of her laughter was very sorrowful. "Why is it that you always treat other friends better than you treat me?"

Wang Dong: "Because you are not my friend."

Hong NiangZi: "I am not your friend? Could it be that you have forgotten how happy we were when we were together in the past?"

Wang Dong: "I have forgotten."

Hong NiangZi shook her head at him. "No matter how firm the words you speak from your lips may be, I know that your heart has not forgotten in the least." Her eyes were misty as she gently carried on, "Do you still remember? There was one day where we lay on the summit of Mount Hua with the white clouds as our blankets and the earth as our bed, and it seemed that we were the only two people left in the space between heaven and earth." Her voice grew even more enchanting, more soft and tender. "And then, there was another time where we were lying together in that large boundless desert, counting the stars in the sky, until the two of us were buried beneath the sand... Are you able to forget these things?"

Wang Dong did not speak anymore. No one would ever be able to forget those things. Was he really able to forget? As he faced the first lover he had ever had in his life, was his heart really able to stay as calm as his face was?

Hong NiangZi stared intently at him, her eyes showing the reflection of tears. "I will never be able to forget any of these things. That is why I hate you; I hate you for not saying a single word to me before you left. I hate you so much I want you to die. But..." Her head lowered. "So long as you are willing to change your mind and heart, so long as you are

willing to say one sentence, I will leave with you right now. Even if it is to the ends of the earth, I will still follow you."

Wang Dong suddenly yelled, "I am not going anywhere." His voice was loud, as if he was trying to wake himself up from a dream.

She bit down on her own lip again as she asked, "If you will not go anywhere, then why did you come here?"

"I was forced," he replied in his cold tone.

"Aside from this, there was no other reason?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Hong NiangZi: "You did not want to come see me?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Hong NiangZi's suddenly became an ugly shade of blue, like a blue scorpion. The tenderness and sweet look in her eyes had disappeared. Stamping her foot forcefully, she announced, "Fine. The antidote is back there. Go get it yourself." Wang Dong turned his head and saw the porcelain bottle on the grave. "This time, we were willing to give the antidote to you only because we still think of you as our friend. You had best take it and then hurry up and leave."

There was still no expression on Wang Dong's face. Regardless of what she said, he did not believe a single word. He knew that they definitely would not give him the antidote so easily. But he still walked over. He had no choice but to take that antidote. If that bottle was in water, then he would jump into the water. If that bottle was in a blazing fire, he would jump into the fire.

The snow was cold and soft. Wang Dong had only taken six or seven steps before he was able to reach his hand out and take hold of the antidote. He reached out his hand. The bottle was very cold, like a corpse's hand. He picked up the bottle. His hand was colder than the bottle. This was because he could already feel the breath of death.

A pair of hands suddenly stretched out from within the grave, sealing the "Huantiao" acupoint on his knee. At the same time, another pair of hands emerged from the snow and, with a wave, fired two cold points like stars into his ankles. He fell to his knees, kneeling in front of the grave. And only then did he see that there was a hole in the grave. That grave was actually fake; it was empty.

Hong NiangZi's chime-like laughter rang out again. Her smile was sweet as she stated, "Now, there really is no need for you to go anywhere..."

Wang Dong knelt in front of the grave, his face still expressionless, but his complexion was now frighteningly pale. He understood these people very well and understood their schemes. He was waiting, waiting for them to execute their schemes.

At last, a voice was heard coming out from the grave: "You have lost." He knew this was Cui MingFu's voice. Regardless of where Cui MingFu was speaking from, his voice always sounded as if he was inside a grave.

"I have lost." He could only admit defeat.

Cui MingFu sneered, "This time, you have no chance of recovering your losses."

Wang Dong: "I don't."

Cui MingFu: "Do you know what you have lost?"

Wang Dong: "I only have my life to lose."

Cui MingFu: "You have something else."

Wang Dong: "What else do you want?"

Cui MingFu: "You should know. When hands reach out from a coffin, what are they asking for?"

Wang Dong: "Money?"

Cui MingFu: "Correct. I want money."

Wang Dong: "If money is what you want, then you have gone to the wrong person."

Cui MingFu: "I never go to the wrong person."

Wang Dong: "I should be the one asking for money. I should have a claim in that shared 'account.' "

Cui MingFu: "Of course you have your share, but you should not have pocketed the other four portions yourself."

Wang Dong did not speak, but the look on his face suddenly grew very strange.

Cui MingFu: "In those few years, our income was not bad."

Wang Dong: "Not bad at all."

Cui MingFu: "Is it true that only the five of us knew how much our income actually was?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Cui MingFu: "And is it also true that only the five of us knew how much of it we had actually saved and where we had hid it?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Cui MingFu: "Was there a sixth person?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Cui MingFu: "And whoever took that sum of money, regardless of who it was, would have enough to comfortably enjoy his lifetime?"

Wang Dong: "Even the most wasteful person would have enough."

Cui MingFu: "But it was only after you left that we realized the only person who would be enjoying anything was you."

Wang Dong: "You believe I took the sum of money with me?"

Cui MingFu: "Not a single cent is left of that money. Who do you think took it away?"

Wang Dong released a lengthy breath. "I now finally know for what reason you are here."

Cui MingFu's smile was chilly. "I had known long ago for what reason you had left. That sum of money was enough to make any person doublecross his friends."

Wang Dong suddenly started laughing.

Cui MingFu: "Do you think we are very funny? Think we are a bunch of idiots?"

Wang Dong: "I am the idiot. Anyone who gets that sum of money would not choose to live the way I have been living unless he is an idiot."

Cui MingFu: "What kind of life are you living?"

Wang Dong: "A life of poverty."

Hong NiangZi: "Poverty?" She suddenly jumped up and, with her silver bell-like laugh, asked, "How poor are you?"

Wang Dong: "Very poor."

Hong NiangZi: "We heard that in a single night, someone had lost tens of thousands of liang of silver at Kui Yuan Guan in Xiancheng. Who was this person?"

Wang Dong: "Me."

Hong NiangZi: "We also heard that someone bought several hundred liang of silver worth of wine from Yan Mao Yuan Wine Shop at the foot of the mountain. Who was that?"

Wang Dong: "Me."

Hong NiangZi: "There was also someone who recently put in all new furniture in his manor. Even the chairs in the small house at the back are made from sandalwood and are at least worth seven hundred liang of silver. Who was that?"

Wang Dong: "That cannot really be counted."

Hong NiangZi: "We have already inquired about. Even though this place is called 'Wealthy Manor,' aside from the name, there is nothing else that has been wealthy about it since the previous generation."

Wang Dong: "That is correct."

Hong NiangZi: "And in these years, you have not gone out and done any business?"

Wang Dong answered nonchalantly, "If a person can stay at home and live comfortably, why would he go out?"

Hong NiangZi: "Money certainly cannot fall from the sky."

Wang Dong: "But it can be dug up from the ground."

In a charming voice, Hong NiangZi said, "I did not think you would admit to it so quickly."

Wang Dong: "Could I not admit to it?"

Hong NiangZi: "No."

Wang Dong: "So, since the answer is no, why wouldn't I admit it?" He gave a smile, but that smile was very forced. "If all of you wanted to investigate someone's background, you would dig up information on three generations of his ancestors. If you want someone to tell you something, even a mute would have no choice but to speak. I should at least understand this point better than anyone else."

"That's why there is no need for you to try and leave," Cui MingFu coldly told him.

Wang Dong sighed, "Sadly, many people frequently will still do things that they should not be doing."

Cui MingFu: "Fine. Let's leave."

Wang Dong: "Leave? To go where?"

Cui MingFu: "To get back our three shares."

Wang Dong: "Fine. You guys go ahead and get it."

Cui MingFu: "Where do we go to get it?"

Wang Dong: "Go wherever it pleases you."

Cui MingFu: "If you do not tell us, how would we know where the money is hidden?"

Wang Dong: "Why should I tell you? I never said anything."

"You still will not admit it?" Cui MingFu roared.

Her smile was icy and uncaring as Hong NiangZi asked him, "Do you want money or your life?"

Wang Dong: "When I know I can continue living, of course I would want my life. If I cannot live, then I can only take the money."

Cui MingFu: "What must be done in order for you to tell us?"

Wang Dong: "If you promise to give me back my life, I will give you back your money."

Cui MingFu was quiet for a time, but suddenly agreed, "Fine. I will give you your life back."

Wang Dong: "One life in exchange for one share of the money."

Cui MingFu: "How many lives do you have?"

Wang Dong: "Mine is one, Guo DaLu is one, Lin TaiPing is one, and Yan Qi is one. Four lives; four shares of money."

Cui MingFu: "One life, four shares of money."

Wang Dong: "That will not work."

Cui MingFu: "Even if it will not work, you must make it work. You are alive and moving, but money is inanimate. Do you think that we would be worried about not finding the money if we were able to find you?"

Wang Dong also became silent for a long while. At last, he said slowly, "Alright. Then first return the life."

Cui MingFu: "Whose life would you like us to return?"

Wang Dong: "Which person are you asking to return the money?"

Hong NiangZi started laughing loudly as she spoke, "I knew all along that he at least can be considered an intelligent person. At least he knows that no other person's life is worth as much money as his own."

Cui MingFu: "We will first neutralize your poison but will not unseal your acupoint."

Wang Dong: "If my acupoint is not unsealed, you can still take my life at any time."

Cui MingFu: "My promise to spare your life is enough."

Hong NiangZi chortled, "Yes. Being alive is always better than being dead. You should think on the bright side."

Wang Dong was silent for another little while before finally exhaling a long sigh. "It seems I have no other path to take."

His voice icy, Cui MingFu told him, "The instant you took that money, you had set yourself on a path to ruin."

Wang Dong: "Someone who has had their 'Huantiao' acupoint sealed is not able to walk down any path."

With an alluring smile, Hong NiangZi purred, "If you cannot walk, then I will carry you on my back. Don't forget you used to always be on top of me."

Cui MingFu interrupted in a cold tone, "You walk with me."

Hong NiangZi blinked her eyes at him. "Then who will carry him?"

Someone suddenly burrowed out like a snake from the snow. "Me."

Wang Dong leaned against Scarlet Serpent's back. Scarlet Serpent's body felt lithe, damp, and cold as ice.

The fog had nearly dissipated, yet the sky was still dark and overcast. The sun could not be seen; brightness could not be seen. There was no brightness because there was no hope.

Scarlet Serpent spoke unexpectedly, "This is the road back to your home."

Wang Dong: "I just hope that it is not the road back to my 'old home' [lao jia; place of origin; to go back to 'lao jia' means to die]."

Scarlet Serpent: "Did you hide the money in your house?"

Wang Dong: "If it were you, where would you hide it?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Of course it would be in a place that is within easy reach. Money is like women: it is best to keep it somewhere where you can easily reach over and touch it."

Laughing, Wang Dong complimented, "I never knew you understood women too."

Scarlet Serpent: "It is because I understand them that I do not want any."

Wang Dong: "You only want money?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Money is better than women. Money will never deceive you. Nothing in the world is more faithful and true than it."

Wang Dong: "That is why money can be put in the guest hall, but women cannot."

Scarlet Serpent: "The money is in the guest hall?"

Wang Dong: "What place is more spacious and conspicuous in a person's house than the guest hall?"

Scarlet Serpent nodded his head in agreement. "True. The more conspicuous a place is, the less people will pay attention to it."

Cui MingFu was always one who was unwilling to walk in front of other people. There truly are people like that in this world. The number of times he had underhandedly attacked someone from behind was too many to count, and so, he never allowed others to walk behind him.

He stuck very close to Hong NiangZi, like he was her shadow. In fact, Hong NiangZi could actually feel his icy breath – a breath that carried in it the odour of a rotting corpse. The look on her face was rather unsightly, but Cui MingFu could not see her face. He could only see her neck, and he was gazing upon it right then with an expression of admiration because that pale, smooth neck had developed goosebumps on it from the caress of his breath.

Hong NiangZi, though, was staring at Wang Dong, who was walking in front of her, and all of a sudden asked, "Do you think he really will take us to the money?"

Cui MingFu: "He has no other choice." Hong NiangZi: "But I sense something is not right."

Cui MingFu: "What is not right?"

Hong NiangZi: "He is not such an easy person to handle, nor should he be one who is so scared of dying."

A cold smirk touched Cui MingFu's lips as he stated, "He can be whatever person he wants. It does not matter anymore."

Hong NiangZi: "Why?" Cui MingFu: "Because he is now a dead person."

Hong NiangZi: "Dead person?" Cui MingFu: "Did you really think I would let him keep his life?"

"Of course I knew you wouldn't," Hong NiangZi said in her enchanting way, "but, at the moment, he still is not dead."

Cui MingFu clarified, "He may not be totally dead, but he is more than halfway there."

Hong NiangZi: "He still has friends."

Cui MingFu: "One is on the brink of death and the other two are as good as dead. Any one of us is enough to take care of the two of them. What are you worrying about?" She gave a little giggle. "I'm not worried. I just feel it is a pity."

Cui MingFu: "What is a pity?"

Hong NiangZi: "It is a pity that I did not get to sleep with those three youngsters."

All of a sudden, Cui MingFu sunk his teeth into her neck, like a mad dog biting a female dog.

The sky was gloomily dim, causing the guest hall to be quite dark. The windows were open. From outside, two shadows could be faintly seen inside. "Who is in there?" Scarlet Serpent demanded.

In a casual tone, Wang Dong responded, "It seems that lately, your eyes are not very good." Scarlet Serpent's vision had always been poor. Anyone who had spent his entire life immersed in different sorts of poisons would have poor vision. However, a person with even worse vision would still only need to look a little longer before being able to determine that those were only two straw men – straw men clothed in hemp and mourning apparel. Wang Dong gave an unexpected laugh. "If you have not seen clearly yet, then I might as well tell you: if I die, they will be my filial sons; if you die, I'm afraid you, too, will only have them as your filial sons."

Scarlet Serpent: "Having filial sons like those is better than having a prodigal son."

Wang Dong: "And that is why you would rather have no children and grandchildren?"

Scarlet Serpent: "It is even better when you do not have a single friend."

Hong NiangZi suddenly rushed towards them and demanded, "Where are your friends?" She was asking Wang Dong because nobody else there had friends.

Wang Dong: "They are waiting for me at the foot of the mountain."

Hong NiangZi: "Why at the foot of the mountain?"

Wang Dong: "If you were them, under such circumstances, where would you go to wait for me?"

Scarlet Serpent interjected, "She would never wait for you in the first place."

End of Chapter 23

Chapter 24 - The Straw Men's Secret

Hong NiangZi blinked at him innocently. "I always thought the one person who understood me the best was you. Do you know why?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Hmph."

Hong NiangZi: "Because only a woman can truly understand another woman. Everyone knows this principle."

Wang Dong cried out, "He is a woman?"

Hong NiangZi: "Did you think he is a man?"

Wang Dong: "He looks like one."

Hong NiangZi: "Even if was a man in the beginning, he spent several decades soaking himself in poisons and had transformed into a woman long ago." Scarlet Serpent's entire face froze, like a snake that had been grabbed seven inches from its head.

As Hong NiangZi cackled with laughter, she continued, "This is his biggest secret. I should actually not say anything, but fortunately, you are not an outsider so..." Deliberately lowering her voice, she whispered secretively, "I can tell you another secret, too."

Wang Dong: "What secret is that?"

Hong NiangZi: "I know he and Big Centipede were very 'good friends.' "

Roaring in laughter, Wang Dong corrected her, "You are wrong. They were not 'friends,' but actually..."

Throughout the conversation, Scarlet Serpent's eyes had been fixed upon her. Those eyes, cold as ice, had now turned a fierce green color, and all of a sudden, he aimed directly at her face and blew out a breath. It was only a very light breath, yet Hong NiangZi dodged it as if it was the world's cruellest and most aggressive projectile weapon. She did not even have a chance to say anything before she had leapt up and, with a flip in midair, landed inside the back of the house. Cui MingFu, who had been behind her the whole time, had already disappeared.

Wang Dong spoke up, "I had not believed a single word she said."

Scarlet Serpent: "You never were stupid."

"Why do you say that?" Wang Dong gave an unexpected little laugh before carrying on, "If what she said was not true, though, why would you want to take her life?"

"Do you want me to take your life too?" Scarlet Serpent threatened in a chilly tone.

Wang Dong: "This life of mine has not belonged to the Wang family for a long time now. It does not matter to anyone if it is taken. But what about you?"

Scarlet Serpent: "What about me?"

"No one would mourn," Wang Dong said. He then asked, "Would anyone be happy?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Yes."

Wang Dong: "You know she hates you?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Hmph."

Wang Dong: "Why is it, then, that all this time, she never tried to kill you?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Because she knows that I am more useful alive than dead."

Wang Dong: "What about in the future?"

Scarlet Serpent: "The future?"

Wang Dong clarified, "In the future, when you are all dividing the money." Scarlet Serpent's face had frozen again. "When Big Centipede died, were they sad at all?" Wang Dong asked.

Scarlet Serpent: "Hmph."

Wang Dong: "Why were they not upset?"

Scarlet Serpent: "Because the shares of money are bigger when divided among three people instead of four."

Wang Dong: "What if there are only people two people to split the money?"

Turning his head back, Scarlet Serpent glared at him. "What are you trying to say?"

Wang Dong: "You should know what I am trying to say, and you have known this fact for a long time."

Those bright green eyes suddenly became the color of ashes, cold and impassive.

Wang Dong: "It is always a little better if one mantou [steamed bun] is shared to eat between two people instead of three. Everyone understands this idea, but the question now is, who are the two people who are going to get to eat the mantou?"

Scarlet Serpent: "What do you say?"

"I know how good your kung fu is," Wang Dong answered casually. "Obviously, you would not be scared of Hong NiangZi."

Scarlet Serpent: "Hmph."

Wang Dong: "However, what sort of relationship does she have with Cui Laoda [biggest brother]? What sort of relationship do you have with Cui Laoda? Can you compare to her?"

Scarlet Serpent smiled coldly. Under certain circumstances, if a person gives a cold smile, it means that he does not know what to say in response; it means that his heart is filled with unease. Someone who is usually very confident in everything he does will seldom show that type of cold smile. Therefore, Wang Dong immediately took advantage of this opportunity and continued, "That is why, you must hurry up and think of a plan if you want to eat the mantou."

Scarlet Serpent hesitated, but at last, he could not help asking, "What sort of plan?"

Wang Dong: "Find another person and have him help you steal that mantou back."

With another cold smirk, Scarlet Serpent inquired, "And what sort of person should I be looking for?"

Wang Dong: "First, this person cannot be too greedy."

Scarlet Serpent: "Is there such a person in this world?"

Wang Dong: "I am not a greedy person."

Scarlet Serpent: "Hmph."

Wang Dong: "This may not have been true in the past, but I now realize that it is better to have two people share the mantou than have no mantou to eat at all."

Scarlet Serpent stared intently at him. "What is the second criterion?"

Wang Dong: "Second, that person must be inferior to you."

Scarlet Serpent: "Why must he be inferior to me?"

Wang Dong: "So that way, he would not dare attempt to plot against you."

Scarlet Serpent: "And you are inferior to me?"

"If I was stronger than you, why would I need you to carry me on your back now?" Wang Dong pointed out with a grin.

A spark suddenly lit up in those eyes that had been the color of cold ashes. "Are you truly siding with me?"

Wang Dong: "I have no other choice but to side with you."

Scarlet Serpent: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because their side is too complete."

Scarlet Serpent's eyes brightened a little more. "What can you do for me?"

Wang Dong: "I still have my hands."

Scarlet Serpent: "What can your hands do?"

Wang Dong: "At the very least, they can grab ahold of someone."

Scarlet Serpent was no longer smiling coldly because he was gradually starting to feel more confident.

Wang Dong: "Right now, there is only one remaining question."

Scarlet Serpent: "Say it."

Wang Dong: "Are you able to handle Cui Laoda?"

Scarlet Serpent: "What do you think?"

Wang Dong: "If it was a real fight, I do not know. If, though, you strike unexpectedly and attack when he is unprepared, then..." His lips suddenly pressed together. Scarlet Serpent had also closed his mouth before strolling into the manor.

Cui MingFu and Hong NiangZi were already inside. The house was very bright. Under the light of day, Cui MingFu's face looked like a sheet of white paper – a dry and wrinkled sheet of paper. Some people should not see daylight; he was clearly one of those people.

Scarlet Serpent set Wang Dong down in a chair and addressed them, "You have already looked around."

Cui MingFu: "We have looked through every place."

Hong NiangZi piped in with her charming voice, "We even looked in the toilet. The strange thing is, that place did not smell too badly." She cast a glance over at Wang Dong and added, "Therefore, I know that there is one person in your group of friends who likes cleanliness."

Wang Dong's voice was cold as he said, "What else do you know?"

Giggling, Hong NiangZi replied, "I know that person is definitely not you."

Scarlet Serpent: "Where are his friends?"

Cui MingFu: "They all left."

Hong NiangZi looked over at Wang Dong again. With her alluring smile on her face, she said, "It seems that the people you befriended lately are not good friends of any sort."

Wang Dong's tone was matter-of-fact as he stated, "There are no friends in the world who are truly willing to die with you." This time, her gaze turned to rest on Scarlet Serpent, who had not seemed to hear or see anything.

"There are no other people in the house?" Scarlet Serpent questioned.

Cui MingFu: "Only these two straw men."

Wang Dong: "Straw men are not people."

Cui MingFu all of a sudden let out a chilling cackle. "Do not forget that straw men can kill too."

Wang Dong's expression suddenly shifted slightly. All the while, Cui MingFu had fixed his eyes on Wang Dong's face. In the instant when that slight change in expression occurred, Cui MingFu struck.

Very few people knew what Cui MingFu used to kill people because when he acted, he truly killed. Once he struck, he would never give his opponent the chance to live. Otherwise, he would not bother to attack. Only people who had actually watched him commit murder knew what

weapon he used. And only four people had ever seen him murder. Wang Dong had seen him.

The weapon he used to kill was two piercers. These piercers were like steel wires, able to wind around and stay close to you like a wandering soul, to entangle your weapons, and to wrap around and break your neck. Or they could stab into your heart in one thrust. These were his “Double Attack Flying Wandering Soul Piercers.”

Many people in jianghu had become famous due to their exclusive weapon because, in a fight, a person has great advantages, many unthinkable advantages, if he uses a bizarre weapon.

Therefore, if you are able to invent an exclusive weapon that nobody had previously thought of, you will surely be able to make a name for yourself in jianghu – and that name of yours will be written in other people’s blood. But in the end, you, too, will die by some sort of exclusive weapon that you had never before imagined.

The straw men’s bodies looked very bloated. They were fatter than when they had been flying the kites. Other people may not have observed this point, but there was no way Cui MingFu did not notice because he was the one who made the straw men.

Although he had an unintelligent-looking face, he had a pair of skilful hands. People who are genuinely smart do not display their intelligence on their face.

Straw men do not eat fatty meats or drink wine. Why would they suddenly get fat in a single night? Could someone be hiding inside the straw men, ready to jump out in a surprise strike? This was the final attack that Wang Dong, Yan Qi, and the others had planned earlier?

The expression on Wang Dong's face changed rapidly.

Like lightning, Cui MingFu's "Double Attack Flying Wandering Soul Piercers" had stabbed the straw men's hearts. They had stabbed in deep. Extremely deep.

End of Chapter 24

Chapter 25 - The Final Attack

It is true that there are very few friends in the world who will go through life and death with you. It is even rare for husbands and wives, let alone friends. But this sort of friend is not non-existent. At least Guo DaLu and the others were this type of friend.

They knew that Wang Dong was at the crossroad of life and death. How could they be willing to leave Wang Dong alone in the danger? How could they leave?

The straw men had gotten fatter. Fat people have lots of blood. Cui MingFu's "Double Attack Flying Wandering Soul Piercers" had thrust deep into their hearts. But there was no blood. Not a single drop. This time, it was not Wang Dong's expression that transformed; it was Cui MingFu's.

When the look on Cui MingFu's changed, a spark had lit up in the eyes of Scarlet Serpent. And in that same moment, Wang Dong grabbed tightly onto Hong NiangZi's hand.

The stinger of a bee is poisonous. Cui MingFu's piercers were more poisonous. Once a bee's stinger has pierced someone, it is no longer poisonous.

Right now, Cui MingFu's piercers were still stabbed into the straw men's hearts. How could Scarlet Serpent pass up this opportunity? Aiming directly into Cui MingFu's face, he blew forcefully. From the light shining in through the window, it could be seen that the breath he blew out was a pale green color.

Cui MingFu had seemed to be frozen in shock, but in the instant that breath was released, his sleeve suddenly became a sheath and encased Scarlet Serpent's head. It also contained that breath of air. Scarlet Serpent let out a ghastly scream. It was a sharp and short cry.

Cui Ming Fu was already flying up now, and he hooked one arm around a roof beam. As he hung from that beam, he gazed down at Scarlet Serpent.

Scarlet Serpent's eyes appeared to have become completely blind, incapable of seeing anything now. Resembling a blind dog, he charged forward, swaggering and bounding erratically. One step, two steps, three steps... His face had turned green.

He had only managed to dash out a few steps before collapsing to the ground. No one poisoned by Scarlet Serpent's venom was able to take more than seven steps. Even Scarlet Serpent, himself, was not an exception.

Wang Dong released his hold on Hong NiangZi's arm. There was still no emotion on his face, but his pupils were starting to contract. He was gradually starting to realize what this was all about, that it was not very amusing at all.

But Hong NiangZi evidently thought it was extremely amusing. She had been chortling the whole time and was now laughing incessantly. The sound of her laughter was like the chime of silver bells. It was this same laughter that had captivated him when he had first laid eyes on her.

Even after seeing her several hundred times, he had still believed that there was absolutely no one else whose laughter could be so lovely or pleasing to the ear.

Now, though, all he wanted to do was vomit. No matter what, Scarlet Serpent was a partner and companion whom she had lived with for many years.

Anyone who could laugh so delightedly while standing over the corpse of their companion was sickening and would make people want to vomit.

Hong NiangZi's eyes twinkled. "Are you finding it odd and wondering why I am laughing?"

Wang Dong: "It is not odd."

Hong NiangZi: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because you are not human."

This was also Wang Dong's conclusion.

Cui MingFu was still staring at Scarlet Serpent's body, as if he was afraid that he was not completely dead. Scarlet Serpent was completely dead. In reality, even when he was still alive, he had offered up his entire life to poisons. He did not have any other friends, and in fact, it could be said that he had nothing else. Poisons were his life.

After a long time had passed, Cui MingFu finally turned around slowly and stated, "That is a very loyal person."

Hong NiangZi asked incredulously, "You're saying he is loyal?"

With a nod, Cui MingFu explained, "At the very least, he was loyal to what he did. His poisons really have never once failed."

Hong NiangZi gave another laugh. "So you have even more reason to be grateful to me. Were it not for me, you would be

the one who is now dead.”

“I truly did not think that he would ever betray me,” Cui MingFu said in a detached tone.

Hong NiangZi chuckled, “If you honestly had not thought about it, how could you have already devised a method to take care of him?”

Cui MingFu: “Because I, too, am a very loyal person.”

Hong NiangZi: “What are you loyal to?”

Cui MingFu: “Myself.”

“Why have you never said that I am a very loyal person?” she sighed.

Cui MingFu’s tone was frosty. “Because you are not even loyal to yourself. You often betray your own self.”

Hong NiangZi: “But I have never betrayed you, nor have I ever deceived you.”

His voice was still cold as he retorted, “That is only because no one is able to deceive me.” Turning unexpectedly to Wang Dong, he said, “And that is why you have been an honest person in front of me also.”

Wang Dong did not answer him.

Cui MingFu: “You said your friends have already left, and sure enough, they are not here.”

Still, there was no response from Wang Dong.

Cui MingFu: “Right now, though, I only want to know whether you are more loyal to money or to me.”

Wang Dong: "That will depend on circumstance."

Cui MingFu: "How?"

In a nonchalant sort of tone, Wang Dong replied, "Normally, I would be more loyal to money, but at the moment, I am loyal to you."

Cui MingFu: "Very good. Hand it over."

Wang Dong: "Hand what over?"

Cui MingFu: "What do you have?"

Wang Dong hesitated. At last, he seemed to resolve himself. "There are several flagstones underneath the table that are actually loose. Beneath them is a cellar."

Cui MingFu jeered coldly, "Did you think I could not tell?"

Wang Dong: "If you know, then why are you not going over to retrieve the stuff? It is all there."

Hong NiangZi jumped in, "I will go get it."

Cui MingFu cut her off, "I will." In a blur, he had already soared in front of her. This was the first time in his life that he had ever walked in front of someone – and it would be his last time.

This was the first time in his life that he had ever walked in front of someone – and it would be his last time.

A streak of light flew out slowly from Hong NiangZi's sleeve and struck the "Yuzhen" [Jade Pillow] acupoint on the back of his head. Not only was this fatal attack not executed quickly, it was in fact extremely slow, yet somehow, he was unable to avoid it.

He crumpled to the ground immediately – no resistance, no pain. Indeed, he did not even utter a sound. A live human being had suddenly become a dead human being. No one would ever have believed that he would die so easily. And moreso, he had never thought that the one who killed him would be Hong NiangZi.

Laughter like the chime of silver bells rang out. “This time, you should understand why I am laughing,” Hong NiangZi chortled.

Wang Dong: “Don’t understand.”

Hong NiangZi: “Do you know what I used to kill him?”

Wang Dong did not answer.

Giggling, she told him, “It was the Wandering Soul Piercers that I learned from him.” She laughed hysterically while she continued, “He just finished using Scarlet Serpent’s own poison to kill Scarlet Serpent, and then I immediately used his piercers to stab him to death. This is such a funny situation; even if I tried not to laugh, I would not be able to stop myself.”

Wang Dong: “The only thing I find strange is why he would teach it to you.”

Hong NiangZi: “Because he did not teach me all the key techniques and so he knew that I would never be able to completely learn it.”

Wang Dong: “It is true that you are not quite as fast as he was.”

Hong NiangZi: “Nowhere close. That is why, even though I had learned it, it was useless to me. It could not be used

against anyone else. Wandering Soul Piercers are still his exclusive weapon."

Wang Dong: "So if it is useless, why did you bother learning it?"

Hong NiangZi: "It is not entirely worthless. There is only one use for it; it can only be used against one person."

Wang Dong: "Who?"

Hong NiangZi: "Himself."

Puzzled, Wang Dong asked her, "You cannot use it against other people, yet you can use it against him?"

"Many things in the world are that bizarre," she stated with a giggle.

Wang Dong: "I do not understand."

Hong NiangZi: "There are many more things that you do not understand."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

Hong NiangZi: "I intentionally left you and Scarlet Serpent alone together so that you would have a chance to talk."

Wang Dong realized, "So you had actually run off on purpose."

Hong NiangZi explained, "I first deliberately let slip his greatest secret that he did not want others to know and then left so that he would be livid. Of course, when you saw this opportunity, you definitely would not let it pass."

Wang Dong: "You knew that I would try to find a way to convince him to betray you?"

Hong NiangZi: "It was not you that convinced him; he had that intention for a long time except he had never had the opportunity."

Wang Dong: "You purposely handed the opportunity to him and then told Cui Laoda to be cautious of him?"

Hong NiangZi: "I knew that Cui Laoda had already thought of a way to take care of him. He only needed to attack, and then he would be dead."

Wang Dong: "Your calculations were very accurate."

In her sweet tone, she praised herself, "I do not need to be humble regarding this point."

"I understand that part now," Wang Dong sighed. "What else is there?"

Blinking her eyes, she offered up, "Do you know what Cui Laoda's biggest secret is?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Hong NiangZi: "His hearing was not very good, basically not much different from being deaf."

Wang Dong: "But when I spoke to him, my voice was not very loud and he was still able to hear what I said."

Hong NiangZi: "That is only because he would watch the motion of your lips and he was able to read what you said."

Sighing again, Wang Dong admitted, "That truly is a big secret."

Hong NiangZi: "Aside from me, no one knows this secret. Because his hearing was poor, he never walked in front of

anyone for fear that they would sneakily attack him from behind.” With a laugh, she clarified, “It was not because he was being more cautious than other people; it was only because he was unable to hear the wind sound created by projectile weapons. If someone was to sneak attack him from behind, he had no way of dodging.”

Wang Dong: “If that wind sound was loud and sharp, he still would be able to hear it, but if someone was to strike slowly at him from behind, then he had no choice but death.”

“Precisely,” Hong NiangZi chortled. “Therefore, there was actually nothing better than using those Wandering Soul Piercers that I would never learn properly against him.”

Wang Dong: “And you had it all calculated out that once he heard where the money was, he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself and would rush forward?”

Hong NiangZi: “If it had been anyone else with him, he might still have been able to maintain his patience and keep his guard up, but when he was with me, he always tended to be a little more careless than normal.”

Wang Dong: “Why?”

Hong NiangZi: “Because he always believed that I needed to rely on him, that if he died, I would not be able to live either.”

Heaving a sigh, Wang Dong commented, “And, he always had believed that no one was able to deceive him...”

Hong NiangZi: “It is true that no one was able to deceive him. Only he was able to deceive himself.”

Puzzled, Wang Dong repeated, “You are saying that he was deceiving himself?”

She smiled charmingly at him again. "There are not many men in the world who do not know how to give themselves an ego trip. If men did not build up their own egos, how would women get by?"

Wang Dong was quiet for a long while. "Your calculations were very accurate, as were your judgments."

Hong NiangZi: "But my judgment of you was wrong."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

Laughing, she told him, "I had always thought that you never told lies. I never imagined that, when you told a lie, you would act so natural that you could deceive someone into death without even having to compensate with your own life."

Wang Dong: "What lie did I tell?"

Hong NiangZi: "You said the 'items' are underneath the table. Is that a lie?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Hong NiangZi laughed delightedly, "But I was the only one who knew you were not telling the truth. That is because I am the only person in the world who knows where they are actually hidden."

Wang Dong: "You should know."

Her eyes were sparkling. "Tell me the truth: just now, did it ever occur to you that I was the one who took the money?"

Wang Dong: "No." For a long moment, he did not say anything. At last, he said, "I did not think of any of that. I do not know anything. I only know one thing."

Hong NiangZi: "What is that?"

Wang Dong: "A person should never become too arrogant. It does not matter who. Anyone who thinks that no one is able to fool him is merely fooling himself."

That sweet smile of hers seemed to slip a bit, and she could not help asking, "What is that supposed to mean?"

His tone was indifferent as he replied, "The meaning behind that sentence is: if you can design a trap to ensnare people, someone else can also design a trap to ensnare you."

This, too, was a conclusion.

Conclusions are very rarely wrong. The ones that are wrong usually are not conclusions.

Daylight. In daylight, women always seem to look a little older, a little more haggard.

Hong NiangZi was no longer able to laugh. When women who laugh suddenly cease laughing, they also tend to look older and more haggard. And so, now, Hong NiangZi [Red Lady] practically seemed to have reached the extent of becoming "red granny."

There was no treasure under the table, not even a single copper coin. But there were people – two people. Although Wang Dong was unable to move, these two people were able to. One moved relatively faster while the other moved slightly slower. The faster person was Yan Qi; the slower one was Guo DaLu.

For someone like Guo DaLu, in a time when his friend was in danger, even if you took a whip to drive him away or held a knife against his neck, he still would not go.

Only now did Hong NiangZi realize that she had fallen into a trap herself. But how did she manage to fall in? She had no idea; she had not even noticed a hint of a trap.

A house will always have one corner where the light tends to be a little dimmer. Usually, there will always be a chair in this corner. Hong NiangZi walked over there slowly and lowered herself into that chair. Nobody tried to stop her; there was no longer any need to. After a very lengthy moment passed, she suddenly spoke. "Wang Dong, I know you have always been a very fair person."

Guo DaLu jumped in to respond. "Of course he is." When Guo DaLu was around, the number of occasions that Wang Dong needed to speak would increase.

Wang Dong: "What must be done to be fair?"

Hong NiangZi: "I already told you about my trap a moment ago. Now what about you?" The target of her questioning was Wang Dong. Aside from him, she had not glanced at anyone else.

Yan Qi, though, was glaring with wide eyes at Guo DaLu, and so, it was best for Guo DaLu to keep his mouth shut.

Another long while passed before Wang Dong finally opened his mouth to ask, "From what point did you start telling your side of things a moment ago?"

Hong NiangZi: "From when I gave you the opportunity to speak to Scarlet Serpent alone."

Wang Dong: "Do you know why I said all those things to him?"

Hong NiangZi: "No."

Wang Dong: "Because I needed to find out which one amongst the three of you was the person who had taken the money."

Hong NiangZi: "You said those things to Scarlet Serpent because you wanted to test him?"

Wang Dong: "Correct. If he was the person who stole the items, he would not have acted as he did."

Hong NiangZi: "How did you know the person was not Big Centipede?"

Wang Dong: "If it was him, he would not have taken such a dangerous risk. When someone who is worth tens of millions liang sits under a roof, he will fear that one of the roof tiles may fall down on him and crack his head open."

Hong NiangZi forced a smile onto her face. "Why didn't you just be a little more concise? 'Son of thousand gold [son of a wealthy family] sits not beneath the eaves.' I do know what that saying means."

Wang Dong: "There were only five potential people that could know where the money was hidden. Eliminating three left only you and Cui Laoda."

Hong NiangZi: "But you still were not able to ascertain, between Cui Laoda and I, who was the person who actually took it."

Wang Dong: "At the time, I was not able say with certainty, but I was already confident that, sooner or later, I would be able to find out."

Hong NiangZi: "You truly were confident?"

Wang Dong: "One: I knew that Scarlet Serpent was definitely not a match for Cui Laoda. So long as he made a move, he would undoubtedly die."

Hong NiangZi: "Your judgment is very accurate also."

Wang Dong: "Two: I knew that, between you and Cui Laoda, one of you would have to die."

Hong NiangZi: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because no matter which one of you had the items in your possession, that person absolutely would not let the other live."

Hong NiangZi: "Why do you say that?"

Wang Dong: "Because if there was even one other person amongst us five that still lived, the thief would not be able to enjoy all those riches in peace. But now, it was equivalent to only one other person left; it was the greatest chance 'he' had."

"It truly was too good an opportunity," Hong NiangZi sighed.

Wang Dong continued, "This person had waited so long before this opportunity finally arose. Of course, 'he' would not let it pass him by."

Hong NiangZi: "If you were in that position, you definitely would not have let it pass either."

Wang Dong: "Plus, that person used to be able to put all the blame on me, but now, since I had been located, 'his' secret was going to be revealed sooner or later. Even if 'he' did not want to kill anyone, there would be people who wanted to kill 'him.' "

Quietly, she confessed, "I originally had not intended for them to find you, but..." She gave a small laugh, a very miserable-sounding laugh. In a soft voice, she resumed, "But in my heart, I hoped that they would be able to find you. It would allow me to see for myself, how have you changed in these last several years? How has life been?"

At last, Guo DaLu could not restrain himself any longer and blurted out, "His life has been great; perhaps a little poor, but very happy all the same."

Hong NiangZi nodded her head slowly as she murmured, "You are all very good friends of his, much better, indeed, than the friends he had before." She was silent for quite a while before carrying on, "You had calculated things out, and you had figured out a long time ago that only one person would be left and that person would be the one who stole away the items."

Wang Dong: "This calculation was as simple as one plus one equals to two."

Hong NiangZi: "Is it possible that you had already calculated everything out when you came to meet us?"

Guo DaLu jumped in, "If that was not the case, how could we have been okay about letting him see you?"

Hong NiangZi gave a sigh. "I should have known. I had already perceived that you were not those types of people who would sneak away when they see their friends in danger."

Wang Dong: "They truly are not."

Hong NiangZi: "But there are still some points that I do not understand."

Wang Dong: "You can ask."

Hong NiangZi: "When you fell into our trap and were captured, don't tell me that was deliberate?"

In a detached tone, he replied, "I only knew that an abandoned grave could not suddenly just appear in that place."

Hong NiangZi: "You purposely let them capture you, but were you not scared that they would immediately kill you?"

Wang Dong: "Of course there was a bit of that fear."

Hong NiangZi: "But yet, you still went ahead and did it?"

Wang Dong: "That is because I had already deduced that you guys definitely would not come for the sole reason of killing me. There had to be another purpose."

Hong NiangZi: "You had already guessed what that purpose was?"

Wang Dong: "Correct."

Hong NiangZi: "And you had confidence that you could lure us here?"

Wang Dong: "Just a little bit. Not too much."

Hong NiangZi: "And you still did it?"

Wang Dong: "If a person is only willing to do things when he is absolutely confident about it, then he will never be able to accomplish even a single thing."

Hong NiangZi: "Oh?"

Wang Dong: "Because there is nothing in the world that you can be absolutely certain about."

Hong NiangZi: "You wanted them to hide in here, but were you not concerned that we would discover them first?"

Wang Dong: "That chance was very slim."

Hong NiangZi: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "In order to explain, it needs to be split up into a few scenarios."

Hong NiangZi: "Oh?"

Wang Dong: "At the point in time when there were still three people, at least two of them thought the riches were hidden under the table. Naturally, they would not allow anyone else to first get their hands on it. Even if someone tried to go over and have a look, one of those two would stop him. So, under this circumstance, they [Guo DaLu and Yan Qi] would definitely be safe."

Hong NiangZi: "What is the second scenario?"

Wang Dong: "When there were only two people left, for example, you and Cui Laoda."

Hong NiangZi: "No need to say 'for example.' It was the two of us."

Wang Dong: "At that time, you had already resolved that you would not allow Cui Laoda to live. Even if he wanted to go over for a look, it was certain that you would make a move first. Therefore, under this scenario, they would also be safe."

Hong NiangZi: "The third scenario, of course, is the one where only I am remaining."

Wang Dong: "Correct."

Hong NiangZi: "Your acupoint that was sealed is still sealed."

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Hong NiangZi: "If I discovered that they were hidden in there, is it not possible that I could have trapped them inside first?"

Wang Dong chuckled, "But you knew that the treasures were not hidden there, so why would you go over to look? You would not even bother to pay any attention to it. Therefore, in this scenario, they, too, would be safe."

Hong NiangZi: "You truly were able to calculate things out so perfectly, so precisely?"

Wang Dong: "No, it is fake." He gave a little laugh, then added, "Humans' calculations will always be inferior to Heaven's [fate] calculations. No one is able to calculate things out to ensure one hundred percent certainty of success."

Hong NiangZi: "But you still went and took the risk?"

Wang Dong: "This was our 'lone wager on a single throw,' [to put all the eggs in one basket], our final attack."

She heaved a lengthy sigh. With a bitter smile, she told him, "Your courage was perhaps a bit too excessive."

Wang Dong: "We did not have a lot of courage, nor was our strategy as precisely planned out as yours. Even our

strength was weaker than your group. We should have lost this battle.”

Hong NiangZi: “Yet you won.”

Wang Dong: “That is only because we have something that you guys did not have.”

Hong NiangZi: “Friendship.”

He continued in a deliberate tone, “Although it is something that you can neither see nor touch, the enormity of its power is something that all of you never could have even dreamed of.”

Hong NiangZi was listening. She could not stop herself from listening because she had never heard words like these before.

Wang Dong: “We had the courage to put our lives out there, to take that risk, because we each knew that we were not alone and unaided.” His gaze shifted over towards Yan Qi and Guo DaLu. “If a person knows that, no matter what the circumstance, he will have true friends there standing beside him, willing to go, through life and death with him, and ready to endure trials and tribulations together, he will immediately become filled with courage and confidence.”

Hong NiangZi lowered her head. She seemed to again have aged immensely.

Wang Dong: “I had originally intended for them to leave, but they said one thing that made me change my mind.”

Unable to stop herself, she blurted out the question, “What did they say?”

Wang Dong: "They told me, if we lived, then we would all live happily. If we died, then we would also die together cheerfully. So life or death, what is the big deal?"

These, too, were words that Hong NiangZi had never heard before. She nearly could not make herself believe it, yet right now, she had no choice but to believe. She gazed at these three people. One was covered in wounds. The fact that he was still able to stand was already an uneasy feat. One looked so fragile and thin, as if he was both starved and exhausted.

And even Wang Dong was the same. It would have been inconceivable for someone to say that these three people would be able to force Scarlet Serpent, Cui MingFu, and Hong NiangZi into a place of death. But this inconceivable situation had now become a reality.

What did they possess that could allow them to do this?

Hong NiangZi's head hung low. All of a sudden, she felt as if all her blood was rushing upwards, and she nearly started to weep. She had lost track of how long it had been since she had last truly cried, had nearly forgotten what it felt like to shed tears.

Yan Qi had been watching her all this time, and a look of sympathy gradually started to show in his eyes. He asked suddenly, "You have never before had friends?"

Hong NiangZi shook her head in reply.

Yan Qi: "That is certainly not because friends would not have you, but rather, it is because you would not have any friends."

Hong NiangZi: "But I..."

Yan Qi: "Use your sincerity."

Unable to restrain himself, Guo DaLu jumped in and added, "If there had even been half an ounce of sincerity amongst the three of you, I am certain that you still would all be living happily together today."

Evil can never overcome good. Justice will surely prevail over might. Power that arises because of righteousness and friendship is bound to triumph over aggression that conspires because of personal benefit. Truth and friendship will ever be present.

This was not a slogan. Definitely not. If all of you have heard Guo DaLu and Wang Dong's story, then you know it is absolutely not a slogan. Even if you have not heard it, it does not matter.

That is because, at any time and any place, there are people out there like Guo DaLu and Wang Dong. So long as you are willing to use your earnestness and sincerity to search, then you will surely be able to find friends like these.

End of Chapter 25

Chapter 26 - Spring Has Arrived in the World

Morning. The golden sunshine pierced through the layers of cloud and shone upon the window. A breeze blew past the window, carrying on it a fresh and clean fragrance that had come from a distant hill. Mornings are always lovely, always brimming with hope. But you need not curse the darkness of the night either, for without the ugliness of darkness as comparison, how else could the loveliness of morning be emphasized?

Spring. The golden sunshine pierced through the layers of cloud and shone upon the tips of branches. A breeze blew past those gentle branches, the tips already showing a few new buds of green. Amidst the melting snow, there was the fresh and clean fragrance of spring. Spring is always lovely, always brimming with hope. But you need not curse the harshness of winter, for without that harsh and cruel cold, how else could the warmth of spring be emphasized?

Spring morning.

Lin TaiPing was lying down beneath the window. The window was open, and when the breeze blew by, he could smell that fresh and clean fragrance that had come from a distant hill. In his hand, he held a book, but his eyes were gazing out at the green buds on the tips of the branches outside the window. He had stayed there lying that way for a long time.

The injuries he had sustained had not been more serious than Guo DaLu's, nor had his poisoning been more severe. However, when Guo DaLu was already able to go out and buy wine, he still had to remain in bed. This was because the

antidote had come too late. The venom had already invaded into his internal organs and eroded away at his strength.

Life has always been like this: there is good fortune and bad fortune. He was not complaining. He had now realized that good and bad fortune is not an absolute condition. He was sick, but it was also because of this that he was able to enjoy that slow, leisure feeling and serenity of seclusion that sickness brings. And plus, he had friends to look after and care for him. Life has always had many types of joys and enjoyments that require you to first set aside your biases and open up your mind before you can appreciate them.

He breathed a little sigh and closed his eyes. The door was pushed open lightly, and someone stepped softly into the room. It was a woman wearing a plain cotton dress and no make-up on her face. She appeared very neat and clean, very plain and simple. Her hands carried a wooden tray and on it was a piping hot bowl of congee and two other small dishes.

Lin TaiPing appeared to be sleeping. She quietly walked in, gently set the tray down onto the table, as if she was afraid that she would startle him out of his sleep, and then immediately left the room quietly. But after a moment's pondering, she went back in once again and picked up the wooden tray because she feared that if the congee grew cold, it would be bad for the patient.

Who was this woman? How she did things was really very thoughtful and with the greatest amount of care.

The snow had completely melted. Under the sunshine, the earth was gradually becoming warm and dry. Three wicker chairs and a leisurely game of chess [Go] had been set up in

the courtyard. Wang Dong and Yan Qi were in the middle of a chess game right then.

Guo DaLu was next to them watching, sometimes picking at the loose strands of wicker on his chair, sometimes standing up suddenly and taking a few steps, sometimes stretching his neck and straining to see the distant hills on the other side of the wall. Basically, he was not able to sit still. The only way you would ever get him to sit there quietly and play chess was to chop off his legs. Telling him to sit there quietly off to the side and watch someone else play chess was as bad as killing him.

By now, Wang Dong's white stones had completely surrounded Yan Qi's black ones. Yan Qi held a black stone between the tips of his fingers, wracking hard at his brain and trying to find a way to revive this game. Guo DaLu, though, had been by his side the whole time, wandering back and forth. At last, Yan Qi was unable to restrain himself as he glowered at him and snapped, "Can you not just sit there quietly for a moment?"

Guo DaLu answered, "Nope."

In annoyance, Yan Qi complained, "You have been making a non-stop ruckus. You are so noisy that my heart feels all irritated and my thoughts are in disarray. How do you expect me to play chess?"

"I haven't even said a word," Guo DaLu denied. "How can that be considered making a ruckus?"

Yan Qi: "This behaviour of yours cannot be considered a ruckus?"

Guo DaLu: "This is considered a ruckus? How come Wang Laoda is not blaming me for disturbing him?"

In a matter of fact tone, Wang Dong stated, "Because I am going to win this game soon."

Yan Qi: "The battle is not over right now. It is still not set in stone who is going to win and who is going to lose."

"It is set," Guo DaLu interrupted.

Yan Qi glared at him. "What do you know?"

Guo DaLu grinned. "I may not know chess, but I know that lots of shortcomings come out in the person who loses the chess game."

Yan Qi asked, "Who has lots of shortcomings?"

Guo DaLu: "You! So you have to be the one who is losing the game."

"Correct answer," Wang Dong chuckled. A smile had just appeared on his face when it immediately froze. That woman, dressed in plain, dark garments, was walking down the gravel pathway towards them. The wooden tray in her hand had three cups of hot tea on it. Wang Dong turned his head away, refusing to look at her.

The woman in dark garments offered up the first cup of tea right in front of him and said in a soft voice, "This is your favourite jasmine scented green tea. It was just steeped."

Wang Dong did not hear her.

The woman in dark garments said, "If you would like to drink Dragon Well, I can steep a pot of that as well."

Still, Wang Dong did not hear her.

The woman set the cup down lightly in front of him. "What would you like for lunch today? Are dumplings okay?"

Wang Dong suddenly rose to his feet and strode far away. The woman stood there staring after the outline of his back for a long time. Her heart seemed to be wounded and filled with sorrow.

Guo DaLu offered, "Dumplings sound great. I am just afraid it will be too troublesome for you."

Only then did the woman in dark garments slowly turn around and walk back inside, but after taking a couple of steps, she could not help turning her head to cast another glance at Wang Dong. It seemed as if Wang Dong did not even acknowledge this person's existence. The woman hung her head low and finally left. Although the pain she felt was quite evident, there was not a hint of bitterness or rebuke. No matter how Wang Dong treated her, she was willing to meekly bear all of it. Why would she do that?

Guo DaLu watched as she walked back inside the house before sighing, "This person changed so quickly."

Yan Qi: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Others have said that 'rivers and mountains are easy to alter but an inherent nature is difficult to shift.' From my observations, this saying is not too correct. Hasn't she wholly and thoroughly changed?"

Yan Qi: "Because she is a woman."

Guo DaLu countered, " 'Women are still people.' Isn't this something that you always say?"

Yan Qi gave a sigh before responding, "But when it comes down to it, women are still different from men."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "A woman is willing to completely transform herself for the man she loves. As for a man, even if he changes himself for a period of time for the woman he loves, the change is still only on the surface."

Guo DaLu contemplated over that for a moment. "These words seem to make sense."

Yan Qi: "Of course they make sense. Everything I say always makes sense."

Guo DaLu sniggered.

Glaring at him, Yan Qi demanded, "What are you laughing at? You do not admit that?"

Guo DaLu agreed, "I admit that no matter what you say, there is nothing that I will not agree with." This was known as 'everything has its conqueror; green vegetables go good with bean curd.' Guo DaLu was neither scared of the Heavens or the Earth, but once he saw Yan Qi, he was helpless.

Only now did Wang Dong walk back and sit down. His face was still hard. Guo DaLu asked him, "She was being nice to bring food over to you. Could you not treat her a little better?"

"No," Wang Dong answered curtly.

Guo DaLu: "Don't tell me you get angry the instant you see her."

Wang Dong: "Hmph."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Hmph."

Guo DaLu: "Even if Hong NiangZi was not very nice in the past, she is no longer that Hong NiangZi now. Can you not tell that she has transformed into a completely different person?"

Yan Qi immediately chimed in with him, "Yup. If people saw her today, who would actually be able to guess that she is 'Rescuer of the Poor and Needy' Hong NiangZi?"

It truly was unthinkable. That careful, considerate, gentle, and longsuffering woman dressed in dark garments was actually Hong NiangZi.

That careful, considerate, gentle, and longsuffering woman dressed in dark garments was actually Hong NiangZi.

Guo DaLu: "If anyone is able to guess, I will crawl around in a circle on the ground."

Yan Qi: "I will crawl too."

Wang Dong was frowning as he said icily, "If you two want to crawl all over the ground, that is your business and has nothing to do with me."

Yan Qi: "But you..."

"Have you admitted defeat for this game yet?" Wang Dong cut him off.

Yan Qi snorted, "Of course not."

Wang Dong: "Good. Then cut the bull. Hurry up and play chess."

Sighing, Guo DaLu muttered to himself, "It seems like this guy's problem is even worse than Yan Qi's. I would be surprised if he doesn't lose this game."

As expected, Wang Dong lost that game. His stones clearly had blocked off the escape routes of Yan Qi's, but for some baffling reason, he still ended up losing – by seven stones. Wang Dong stared fixedly at the board for quite a while. Suddenly, he challenged, “Come on. Play another game.”

Yan Qi: “No more.”

Wang Dong: “You have to. How can only one game determine a winner and a loser?”

Yan Qi: “We can play another ten games and you will still lose.”

“Who said?” Wang Dong denied.

Guo DaLu jumped in and answered, “I said so, because you not only have a problem, but the problem you have is not a small one.” Wang Dong stood up to leave, but Guo DaLu grabbed him, demanding loudly, “Why is it that every time we mention this subject, you try to run away?”

Wang Dong: “Why would I need to run away?”

Guo DaLu: “You will have to ask yourself that question.”

“That’s true.” Yan Qi pointed out casually, “If a person did not have a guilty conscience, then no matter what anyone said, he still would not need to run away.”

Wang Dong glared angrily at them. All of a sudden, he threw himself into the chair and growled, “Fine. If you want to talk, then let’s just say it out clearly. How do I have a guilty conscience?”

Guo DaLu countered, “Let me first ask you: who was the one who told her to stay?”

Wang Dong: "Who it was does not matter. In any case, it was not me."

"Of course it wasn't you," Guo DaLu told him. "It was not me either, and it certainly was not Yan Qi." No one had demanded that she stay. She, herself, wanted to remain there. She could have left.

Under those circumstances, if it had been any other people, they undoubtedly would have forced her to reveal the whereabouts of the wealth, and then, it was quite likely that they would have murdered her. However, Guo DaLu and his friends were not this type of people.

They certainly would never kill someone who did not have the ability to fight back and definitely would never kill a woman. They especially would not slay a woman who, firstly, did not have the ability to fight back and more importantly, had a heart of repentance.

Anyone would have been able to recognize that Hong NiangZi had been moved by their great friendship. She had realized that the greatest suffering in the world was not having no money, but rather, it was having no friends.

All of a sudden, she felt that the price she paid for all those things she did in the past and all that she gained was a life of loneliness. She was a woman already in her thirties, and she understood how terrible loneliness could be. She also had come to the understanding that all the riches in the world could not fill the emptiness of a person's heart. This is something that an eighteen, nineteen year old girl is not able to comprehend.

And so, Hong NiangZi did not leave.

Guo DaLu: "You had said that the profit you made in those few years was not a small amount."

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "And you also said that anyone who got that sum of money would be able to enjoy a lifestyle like an emperor for the rest of his life."

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Yet, she would rather give up that emperor's life and stay here to serve and care for you. Has she gone crazy?"

"Of course she is not crazy," Yan Qi cut in. "Plus, even a lunatic would not do that."

Guo DaLu added, "And so, even an idiot should realize the meaning behind her actions and should treat her a little better."

This did not mean that Hong NiangZi never left the house. She had been gone for five, six days, and when she returned, she carried with her a small cloth bundle that contained a few garments of plain, dark cloth and some miscellaneous items. That was all that remained of her wealth and property. What happened to the rest? She had actually taken that sum of money that she had risked her life to obtain and donated it to some charities in the provinces along the coastal area of the Yellow River that were suffering from flooding. This was something that was simply inconceivable.

Wang Dong's expression was still hard like steel.

Guo DaLu: "Even now, you still do not believe her?"

Yan Qi: "We even specially went out and inquired around for you. Do you think that we would help her lie to you?"

Guo DaLu: "Can you really not see why she is doing all this?"

Yan Qi: "Obviously, she is trying to make amends for what she has done wrong. But most importantly, it is because she wants to move your heart and hopes that you will change your mind."

Guo DaLu: "If someone did all that for me, no matter what she did in the past, I would still forgive her."

Wang Dong was silent; the whole time, he did not say anything. After much time had passed, he finally lifted his head and asked, "Are you guys done talking yet?"

Guo DaLu: "We have said everything we should say."

Yan Qi: "We have even said things we should not have said. Now, it is up to you what you are going to do."

Wang Dong: "What would you two like me to do? Kneel down and ask her to marry me?"

Guo DaLu: "Well, that is not necessary, but... but..."

Yan Qi finished for him, "But you should at least be slightly nicer to her."

Wang Dong looked at Guo DaLu, then looked at Yan Qi. Suddenly, he exhaled a very long sigh. "You guys are so great; just great..." Before finishing what he was saying, he stood and left. This time, even though he walked away very slowly, Guo DaLu did not try to pull him back because Wang Dong rarely sighed like that.

The sun had gradually risen up high, and it stretched out Wang Dong's shadow on the ground. His back seemed to be a little hunched, as if it was supporting a heavy burden. Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had never before seen him like this and, out of the blue, they, too, felt their spirits grow heavy.

They did not know how much time had passed when they heard the pad of very light footsteps. Raising their heads, they saw Hong NiangZi standing before them. Forcing a smile onto his face, Guo DaLu invited, "Sit. Please sit."

She sat down, then picked up the tea that she had poured for Wang Dong a moment ago and took a sip. Slowly setting it down again, she suddenly spoke, "I heard everything that all of you said a moment ago."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?" Aside from "oh," he really did not know what else he could say.

Speaking softly, she said, "I am very grateful for the kindness you have shown me, but..." Guo DaLu and Yan Qi waited for her to continue. After a long moment passed, she finally carried on, "But you do not really understand what is going on between him and me."

Neither Guo DaLu nor Yan Qi offered up any comments. They obviously could not say that they very much understood the matters of other people - no one is able to say that.

Hong NiangZi's head was lowered. "We used to be... be really close... extremely close..." Her voice seemed a little choked up. She exhaled a long breath before continuing, "As you said, I decided to stay here because I hoped that I can change his heart back, and we could start over again, living the life we once had."

“You still really cherish those times in the past, don’t you?”
Guo DaLu could not help asking.

Hong NiangZi nodded. In a sorrowful voice, she replied, “But only now do I know that things of the past are in the past. They are like a person’s youth: once it is gone, it will never return.” As she reached this point, she seemed as if she finally could not restrain her tears any longer.

Guo DaLu suddenly felt an aching feeling in his heart. He wanted to say something, yet did not know what to say either. He glanced over at Yan Qi, whose eyes seemed to have grown red. Even though Hong NiangZi had harmed and plotted against them in the past, those thing had been long forgotten by now.

All they remembered was that she was an unfortunate woman who sincerely wanted to repent. In their hearts, there was absolutely no hatred, only sympathy. No one could forget their hatreds as easily as Guo DaLu and his friends did.

Another period of time passed before, with difficulty, Hong NiangZi finally was able to stop her tears from falling. She told them quietly, “But if you believe that his heart really is hard as iron, then you are wrong. The more he treats me this way, the more it shows that he has not yet forgotten the love we shared in the past.”

Yan Qi suddenly nodded his head. “I understand.”
Oftentimes, the deeper the people hurt each other, the more they actually love one another.

Still in a soft voice, Hong NiangZi continued, “If he was actually very nice to me and very polite, it would even be harder for my heart to bear.”

"I understand," Yan Qi said again gently.

Hong NiangZi: "It is because he was too nice to me and too genuine with me in the past that he feels like I have hurt him very deeply – and that is why he now hates me that much."

Guo DaLu comforted, "How could he hate you?"

Hong NiangZi smiled sadly. "I am actually happy that he hates me because, if his feelings for me were not true before, why would he need to hate me now?"

At last, Guo DaLu nodded his head also. "I understand."

Hong NiangZi: "If you pierce a person's face very deeply with a knife, then a very deep scar will definitely be left there and it will never be normal again." Her voice was filled with sorrow. "A scar on the heart is just the same. And so, I know that we will never be able to go back to how we were in the past. Even if we somehow force ourselves to be together, there will always be a distance separating our hearts."

Guo DaLu: "But..... you could at least still be friends?"

Hong NiangZi: "Friends?....."

The sorrow in her smile grew even deeper. "Any two people can be friends, but if these two people were once in love, they will never be able to be friends. Do you agree?"

Guo DaLu had to agree.

Hong NiangZi suddenly rose. "No matter what, though, all of you will always be my friends. I will never forget any of you."

It was only then did Guo DaLu notice that she was carrying a small cloth bundle in her arms. In alarm, he cried, "You are leaving?"

Sadness filled her face. "If I make myself stay here, not only will it be difficult for him, it will also be hard for me. I have thought about it over and over before I decided that it would be best if I leave."

Guo DaLu: "But... but do you have any plans? Where are you going to go?"

Hong NiangZi: "I have not thought about it yet." She did not allow anyone else to speak as she quickly added, "But you do not need to worry. Someone like me can go many places, so for him and for me, please, it would be best if you did not try to stop me."

Guo DaLu turned to look at Yan Qi. Yan Qi looked as if he was dazed.

Hong NiangZi gazed at the two of them. Her eyes seemed to be filled with envy and admiration. Speaking gently, she said, "If you really think of me as your friend, I hope that you will remember one thing."

Yan Qi: "Tell us."

Hong NiangZi stared off into the distance as she spoke slowly, "The hardest thing to come by in this world is not fame, nor is it wealth, but rather, it is the genuine relationships and love that can exist between people. If you get it, you must cherish it. Never let down that person or let yourself down." Her voice had been getting softer and softer until she whispered, "Because only someone who has lost genuine love truly knows how much it is worth treasuring

and understands how painful and lonely life is after it is gone.”

Yan Qi’s eyes really did grow red now and he asked, “What about you? Were you ever genuine in your love with him?”

She was silent for a very long time before finally answering in a low voice, “I actually was not clear about this myself.”

Yan Qi: “What about now?”

Hong NiangZi: “All I knew was that, after he left, I would always think of him. I... found many other people, but not one was able to replace him.” Before she could finish her words, she suddenly covered her face with her hands and dashed out wildly.

Before she could finish her words, she suddenly covered her face with her hands and dashed out wildly.

Guo DaLu wanted to run over and stop her but Yan Qi blocked him. “Let her go,” he said in a sad voice.

Guo DaLu: “Just let her leave like this?”

Yan Qi’s voice seemed distant. “Leaving is not a bad thing. If she did not go, it would probably be even more painful for both of them.”

Guo DaLu: “I am just afraid that she will... will...”

Yan Qi: “Do not worry. She will definitely not do something like that.”

Guo DaLu: “How do you know?”

Yan Qi: “Because she knows now that Wang Laoda’s feelings for her were genuine. That is sufficient.”

Guo DaLu: "Sufficient?"

Yan Qi: "At least, that is sufficient enough to enable a woman to keep on living." Tears spilled out of his eyes as he continued softly, "So long as, in a woman's life, there was one man who was genuine to her, then her life was not lived in vain."

Guo DaLu was staring intently at him. A very, very long time elapsed. At last, he commented, "You seem to understand women very well."

Yan Qi turned his head away, his gaze shifting to something far off in the distance. The sky was a deep blue; the sunshine was splendidly brilliant. Beneath that deep blue sky, a streak of light purple smoke suddenly shot into the sky.

Furrowing his brows together, he wondered, "Why would someone be setting off flares at this time?" As he turned around, he saw Wang Dong standing beneath the eaves and staring at the purple flare. The wind blew over in their direction, and the smoke dissipated with the wind.

Guo DaLu: "As long as someone feels like it, flares can be set off at any time and any place. There is nothing the least bit strange."

Yan Qi appeared to be deep in thought as he murmured, "Is it similar to how kites can be flown at any time and any place?"

Guo DaLu could not hear his words clearly and was about to ask him what he had been mumbling when, out of the nowhere, Wang Dong rushed up to him and demanded, "Where is she?" "She" obviously meant Hong NiangZi.

“She left already,” Guo DaLu informed him, “because she feels that you...”

In a sharp voice, Wang Dong cut him off. “When did she leave?”

Guo DaLu: “Just now...” These two words had just left his lips when Wang Dong leapt up and soared through the air. In a flash, he had already swept over the wall. Guo DaLu snickered, “So, it turns out that he does have feelings for her. She didn’t need to leave.” His voice was filled with mirth as he shook his head and wondered, “Why do women like to be so oversensitive?”

There was not even a hint of amusement on Yan Qi’s face. “Do you really think the flare was sent up into the sky just for fun?”

Guo DaLu: “What other reason could there be?”

Yan Qi sighed, “It seems that you really know nothing about the shady matters of jianghu.”

Guo DaLu: “I never was a veteran of jianghu.”

Yan Qi: “Let’s say you and I wanted to attack someone. You are staying guard up here and I am waiting at the foot of the mountain. When you get news of the person, what sort of method would you use to notify me?”

Guo DaLu: “Won’t happen.”

Yan Qi: “Won’t happen? What does that mean?”

Guo DaLu: “It means that a situation like that would never occur.”

Yan Qi: “Why?”

Guo DaLu batted his eyes. "Because if you were waiting at the foot of the mountain, I would definitely be at the foot of the mountain too."

A tender look appeared in Yan Qi's eyes, but his face was still pulled into frown. "We are talking about serious matters right now. Can you just answer with a few serious words?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes." He mulled over it for a while before he answered, "There is quite a distance between the top and foot of the mountain. Even if I shout and yell, you probably would not be able to hear me."

"Very smart, very smart," Yan Qi scoffed, his voice filled with sarcasm. "You are absolutely brilliant."

Guo DaLu chuckled. He pondered a little longer before suggesting, "I could send someone to alert you."

Yan Qi: "What if there was no one else around?"

Guo DaLu: "Then I would run down the mountain myself."

Yan Qi scowled and stared angrily at him. "What is your brain stuffed with? Straw? Or sticks?"

Guo DaLu grinned back at him. "Aside from straw and sticks, my brain is also filled with thoughts of how to tease you until you are mad. I had always thought that the look you get on your face when you are mad is like a seventeen, eighteen year old girl."

Without giving Yan Qi a chance to open his mouth in response, he quickly added, "Of course I actually know what you are trying to say. You believe that flare is just like those kites; it is one of the signals used in jianghu as a method of communicating information."

Yan Qi was still glaring at him. Finally, after a quite some time passed, he gave a lengthy sigh. "One of these days, you are going to frustrate me to death."

At this moment, another purple flare suddenly shot up into the sky from somewhere at the foot of the mountain. Guo DaLu's expression also grew serious. "In your opinion, somebody of jianghu has come to this place of ours?"

Yan Qi: "And not just one."

Guo DaLu: "You believe that they are here for Hong NiangZi?"

Yan Qi: "I do not know, but Wang Laoda must think so and that is why he rushed out."

Guo DaLu's expression changed and he cried, "If that is the case, what are we still waiting here for?"

Yan Qi: "Because I need to discuss something with you."

Guo DaLu: "What?"

Yan Qi: "This time, could you not come with me and allow me to go by myself..."

He had not finished what he was trying to say before Guo DaLu shook his head vehemently. "No."

Yan Qi knit his brow together. "If we all go, who will stay behind here with Xiao Lin [Little Lin]?" Naturally, they could not leave Lin TaiPing alone there. After the lesson they had learned from last time, no matter what the situation was now, they were all especially careful.

In a quiet voice, Guo DaLu asked, "This time, could you let me go and you stay here?"

Immediately, Yan Qi also shook his head. “No.”

Guo DaLu: “Why?”

Yan Qi’s tone all of a sudden softened. “In the first place, your injuries have not yet completely healed. On top of that, you stubbornly did not care about your life and did not bother waiting for your injuries to get better before sneaking down the mountain by yourself to drink wine.”

Guo DaLu: “Who snuck down the mountain? Did I not bring some wine back...”

Yan Qi’s face was firm as he interrupted, “No matter what, you are not able to fight anyone right now.”

Guo DaLu: “Who said?”

Yan Qi: “I said. Do you want to disagree with me?”

Guo DaLu: “I..... I.....”

Yan Qi: “If you are not convinced, then fight me first. How about that?”

With a bitter little smile on his face, Guo DaLu spread his hands in surrender. “Who said I’m not convinced? I am terribly, extremely convinced.”

He picked up the little table that the chessboard had been set on and muttered, “You hurry up and leave. I will go find Xiao Lin to play a game of chess with me. His poor chess skills [literally, ‘dog ***t chess’] are at about the same level as mine.”

Yan Qi watched him as he left. His eyes became filled with an indescribable tenderness and gentleness, like the spring

breeze that had just melted the ice and snow covering the earth.

It was spring now. Spring should be the season that belongs to passionate young men and women. Spring is not a season for killing. It is only suitable for listening to the melodious chirping of birds or the sound of affectionate whisperings. It is definitely not fitting to hear cries of anguish. But right at that moment, he heard a cry of anguish – a dying person's cry of anguish.

There are some places on the earth where spring seems to arrive particularly late. Then, there are some places that seem as if it is forever spring. In truth, if you want to know whether spring has come yet, you need not look for new buds of green on the tips of branches or ask the wild ducks in the spring river. You only need to ask yourself. True spring is not found on green-covered branches or in the warm waters. The true spring is found inside your heart.

Beneath a steel sabre, there is no spring. Nor is it in a pool of blood.

A person lay in a pool of blood. His breathing had already ceased; that dying cry of anguish had broken off. A steel sabre was still clutched tightly in his hand – a sabre that shone bright as snow. So repulsive, so heavy!

Nine people, nine sabres!

The breeze was saturated with a stench of blood that made people want to heave. Spring had arrived already in this dark grove, but now, it seemed to have departed to some far away place again.

Nine people, all tightly clenching sabres in their hands, surrounded Hong NiangZi. Nine fierce, burly men dressed in black, with malicious looks in their eyes. One was already lying facedown in a pool of blood. Hong NiangZi stared at them, the alluring smile of "Rescuer of the Poor and Needy" showing on her face again. With her slender finger, she pointed at the pool of blood and asked, "Which number was he?"

Seven of the men grit their teeth tightly together. Only one of these men in black, the skinniest one, spat through his teeth, "Old Eight."

Hong NiangZi counted off on her fingers, "The first one who died seemed to be Old Six, then it was Old Two, Old Nine, Old Ten, plus now, Old Eight. Ai! Of the Thirteen Sabres, there are only eight left."

The man in black answered, "Correct. Five brothers of the Thirteen Sabres have already died by your hand." A hoarse growl was emitted from his throat and he rasped, "But eight sabres are sufficient enough to chop you to a pulp."

Hong NiangZi laughed, her laughter like silver bells. Three of the eight men unconsciously retreated back a half a step. She chimed, "Beautiful women are best when they have a lively complexion that emits a fragrance. What a pity it would be to chop a beautiful woman like me, who has that lively complexion and beautiful fragrance, into a pulp?" Her gaze flitted over the faces of the three men who had backed away.

Smiling enchantingly, she addressed them, "You know what sort of good stuff I have in my possession. Why didn't you let your brothers know? You three are so selfish... Dead people cannot speak, but could it be that it is the same for you?"

The three men's faces changed, and they suddenly brandished their sabres and lunged forward.

That tallest and skinniest black-clothed man growled lowly, "Stop!" It was evident that, of these thirteen sabres, he was the number one sabre. The instant his order left his mouth, the sabres immediately halted in midair.

Hong NiangZi chortled charmingly, "See, everyone. I knew that your Zhao Laoda [biggest brother Zhao] would not have the heart to kill me. He may not be a person who is tender and protective to women, but he can still understand the difference between the good and bad of a woman."

Zhao Laoda's face was hard. "You are very good. Indeed, I am reluctant about killing you because I do not want you to die too quickly."

Her eyes sparkled at him and her smile grew even more captivating as she said in a gentle voice, "Whatever time you would like me to die, then I will die at that time. You know that I would be willing to do anything for you."

Zhao Laoda: "Good. Very good." Anyone who wants to be laoda cannot be a person of many words. The less one says, the more value his words will have. Zhao Laoda was not one who liked lots of words, and the words he spoke were short and effective. "You killed five of our brothers. We will slash you five times with our sabres and then, the debt will be considered settled."

Hong NiangZi batted her lashes. "Only five slashes?"

Zhao Laoda: "Mm."

Hong NiangZi: "You do not even want to collect interest?"

Zhao Laoda: "Mm."

Hong NiangZi sighed, "That cannot be considered an unfair exchange. I am very willing to accept it. Plus, right now there are eight of you against one of me, so even if I did not want to agree to it, I would still have to."

Zhao Laoda: "It is good that you realize this."

Hong NiangZi: "Although I understand it very clearly, there is one thing that is rather regrettable."

Zhao Laoda: "What is that?"

Hong NiangZi: "I am afraid of pain." She stared at those sabres in their hands, her face showing a very forlorn expression. "Such big sabres. It must hurt a lot if they slice down on your body."

Zhao Laoda: "Does not hurt."

Hong NiangZi: "It really does not hurt?"

Zhao Laoda: "At the very least, the second slash will not hurt."

Hong NiangZi had a look that appeared as if she still did not comprehend what he was saying. "Do you guarantee?"

Zhao Laoda: "I guarantee."

Hong NiangZi: "Of course I feel a lot more comfortable with your guarantee, but I still have one more condition."

Zhao Laoda: "Say it."

Hong NiangZi: "The first slash has to be from you." With a pair of watery eyes, she gazed at Zhao Laoda and added, "Because I do not trust anyone else; I only trust you."

Zhao Laoda: "Fine." He walked over towards her slowly. His footsteps were so heavy that you could nearly hear the sand and stones being crushed beneath his feet. The sabre still hung by his side. His hand was wide and thin; veins bulged out on the back of it. And then, he utilized one hundred percent of his strength.

And then, he utilized one hundred percent of his strength.

"The second slash will definitely not hurt."

Once this sabre chopped down on its target, it was not possible for anyone to have any feelings of pain – it was not possible for there to be any feeling left at all.

Surprisingly, Hong NiangZi merely shut her eyes, her face still showing that faint smile that could melt souls. She chimed, "Come. Hurry!" There was a bright flash of light from the sabre, carrying with it the piercing sound of rushing wind as it came slicing down.

Then unexpectedly, Hong NiangZi darted beneath that white light. Black silken strands flew up into the air against the flash of brightness. A large section of her hair had been sliced off.

However, one of her hands had already grabbed onto and raised Zhao Laoda's elbow while the other hand was pressing down on an acupoint beneath his ribs. Nobody could determine which acupoint that was, but anyone could tell that it was certainly a fatal acupoint. The look on every person's face was as if they had been kicked in their stomachs.

Hong NiangZi was still giggling, that awful sort of laughter. Like the sound of silver bells, she chortled, "Now you should realize why I insisted you had to be the one who made the

first move. I knew that your hand would go weak because I had known all along that you have taken a fancy to me.”

Zhao Laoda’s hand had not gone weak. His sabre attack had been extremely fast and very fierce. It was just that, as his sabre came down, he had been unthinking and left himself open in that spot beneath his blade.

When facing a woman that had already closed her eyes in anticipation of death, it was difficult to avoid being a little careless. He had learned another lesson: “If you plan to kill, then, at all times, you should also guard against someone trying to kill you.” Naturally, this was not a pleasant thing. “If you plan to kill, you should be prepared to live a life of anxiety and suffering.”

Zhao Laoda sighed. “What do you want?”

Smiling, Hong NiangZi replied, “Nothing much. I merely want to discuss a business transaction with you.”

Zhao Laoda: “What sort of business transaction?”

Hong NiangZi: “Use your one life as an exchange for my life.”

Zhao Laoda: “And how do you want to have this exchange?”

Hong NiangZi let out another laugh. “Very simple. If I die, you will have no hope of living either.”

Zhao Laoda: “What if I die?”

With a sweet smile on her face, she answered, “If you die, of course I will not be able to live either, but how could I ever have the heart to let you die?”

After considering for a moment, Zhao Laoda decided, “Fine.”

Nobody had a chance to grasp what the actual meaning behind his “fine” was. All they saw was the sabre in his hand suddenly coming down again – at his own head.

Hong NiangZi was an experienced person of the martial world. When a veteran of jianghu seizes and lifts up someone’s arm, he or she has undoubtedly taken into account the sabre in the hand of that person is no longer able to injure anyone. Hong NiangZi had calculated everything out very carefully, except she forgot one thing.

Although the sabre in Zhao Laoda’s hand was not able to chop down on her, his arm was still able to bend so that it came down on himself. She had been solely focused on protecting her own life and had not remembered to protect the other person’s life. She had thought that everyone was the same as her, always regarding their own life as being more important than anything else.

However, she had forgotten that, many times, people are willing to give up their lives for love or hatred. The power of love and hatred is often greater than anything else – so great that it was beyond anything she could imagine.

Fresh blood sprayed everywhere.

Dark red blood with bits of milky white flew out. Like drops of rain, it splattered onto Hong NiangZi’s face. Her eyelids were covered by the blinding red. All she saw were those eyes of Zhao Laoda, previously filled with rage and hatred, suddenly bulge out like a dead fish. And then, they were obscured by the blood.

At once, outraged cries, like wild beasts that had fallen into traps, rose up around her. The shrill noise of the wind created by sabres cutting through the air came forcing down on her from all directions. She threw herself into the air and

dodged as she tried to force her eyes open. But still, she could not even catch a glimpse of the sabres' light; all she could see was the red glow of blood.

She leapt up again. There was an unexpected cold sensation on her leg. It did not seem to be very painful, but the strength in her leg seemed to have disappeared suddenly. Her body immediately started to fall.

She knew that this descent would send her down into an endless darkness, a place beyond redemption. Strangely, though, there was no fear in her heart, only a peculiar sort of grief. She suddenly thought of Wang Dong again. Where do a person's thoughts turn right before his death?

Perhaps no one can actually answer this question because under such circumstance, what each person thinks of will be different. She thought of Wang Dong, remembered his face that was cold as ice and his heart that was warm like fire. A faint smile appeared on her face, as if she felt that, so long as she was able to hear the sound of his laughter again, life or death did not matter.

The crying sound was clear, like a hawk or crane in the heavens spiralling downwards. Hong NiangZi's body was sinking downwards also. She felt herself unexpectedly relax, felt that she could let go of everything because now, all of it was unimportant. And so, she sank down like that, falling onto the ground, not even bothering to open her eyes.

It was fortunate that she did not open her eyes. If they had been open, her heart may have shattered and her insides may have torn apart. The brilliant light of the sabres interwove and came slicing down on Hong NiangZi.

All of a sudden, with a loud roar, someone soared down from the tops of the trees, charging into the light of the sabres.

He seemed to have forgotten that he was made of flesh and blood and that sabres were used for killing. And just like that, he rushed into the middle of that light. A cry of alarm resonated out. “King of Eagles!”

“King of Eagles!”

“King of Eagles did not die!”

Another person shouted angrily, “Then he will die now!”

Naturally, there was a chance that Wang Dong was going to die. He understood this point very clearly. However, he also knew that, so long as he was still alive, no one would be allowed to take Hong NiangZi’s life in front of him.

Using his body of flesh and blood as a shield in front of Hong NiangZi, he blocked those killing sabres. Though the sabres were sharp and heavy, he refused to draw back. This sort of courage was not only worthy of respect, it was also fearsome, very fearsome.

When Yan Qi arrived, Wang Dong’s body was already covered in seven, eight sabre wounds. Blood streamed out from each gash. Normally, the courage of any other person would have flowed out along with the blood. His did not. As Yan Qi looked upon him, even though his heart did not shatter and his insides did not tear apart, his blood started rushing up into his head and throat. In that instant, he suddenly forgot about his own life.

Where does courage come from? Sometimes, it arises because of honor; at times, it is because of hatred. Sometimes, it is for love; other times, it is for friends. Regardless of where the courage originates from, they all equally deserve to be respected and are equally admirable.

Guo DaLu had come also. No matter what the reasons or what the situation was, he still would never allow his friends to fight with their lives while he stayed at home playing chess. It was a shame that, by the time he got there, the bloody battle had already come to an end. There were only nine sabres remaining on the ground. Some lay in a pool of blood while others were stabbed into trees. Some of the edges of the blades had curled; others had completely snapped.

Wang Dong was caring for the wound on Hong NiangZi's leg, having utterly forgotten about the injuries on his own body. Yan Qi watched them silently. It was uncertain whether that was happiness in his gaze or sorrow.

Quietly, Guo DaLu walked over and whispered, "Where are they?"

At the same time, Yan Qi asked him, "Where is he?"

Guo DaLu: "Who are you asking about?"

Yan Qi: "Xiao Lin."

Guo DaLu: "Of course I would never leave Xiao Lin in the house by himself."

Yan Qi: "You brought him along?"

With a nod of his head, Guo DaLu answered, "He is sitting in that large tree over there." Because of where the tree was situated, everything that happened where they were could be seen from atop that tree, but the people here could not see up into it.

There are skills and techniques to hiding; it is actually an art. "At the proper time, find a proper place." This is the

essence of the entire meaning behind the two words, “to hide.”

Guo DaLu: “I was asking about those people with the sabres.”

Yan Qi: “They have all left.”

Guo DaLu picked up a sabre from the ground, weighing it roughly in his hand, as he grinned, “No wonder they left their sabres behind. You really cannot run very quickly with such a heavy sabre in your hand.”

Yan Qi: “Correct. That’s because they are not people who are known to flee.”

Guo DaLu: “You know them?”

Yan Qi: “Don’t know them, but I know of them. Thirteen Sabres is well-known both inside and outside the Central Plains.”

Guo DaLu: “Well-known bandits?”

Yan Qi: “Well-known as bold and unyielding men.”

Guo DaLu: “But the bold and unyielding men have fled this time.”

Yan Qi: “Are you thinking that they were afraid of dying?”

Guo DaLu: “If they were not afraid, why would they run away?”

Yan Qi gazed at Wang Dong. “What they feared was not death but was, in fact, a sort of courage that leaves people with no choice but to be afraid.” He continued slowly, “Maybe they were not actually afraid but rather, were

touched... They are people, too. Each person has a chance of being touched by something at one point in time.”

Guo DaLu was silent in thought for a while until he suddenly wondered, “How did they know Hong NiangZi was here?”

Yan Qi: “The news that Cui MingFu and the others died here is already known by many people in jianghu.”

With a sigh, Guo DaLu remarked, “News in jianghu spreads very quickly.”

Yan Qi: “The ears of people belonging to jianghu have always been extremely sharp, let alone the fact that hatreds and enmities will cause a person’s ears to be even sharper.”

Guo DaLu: “The enmity between them had been very deep?”

Yan Qi: “Thirteen Sabres and Cui MingFu could actually have been considered associates, but Hong NiangZi betrayed them. One time, when they were being besieged by enemies, she actually...”

Abruptly, Guo DaLu cut him off, “I do not care to hear about those types of dog-eat-dog matters.”

Yan Qi: “Than what do you want to hear?”

As Guo DaLu turned his gaze over to Wang Dong and Hong NiangZi, a gentle sort of radiance gradually showed in his eyes. “Right now, I just want to hear something that will make my heart happy or maybe a joyful type of news. For example...”

Yan Qi looked at him, his eyes also softening as he asked quietly, “For example what?”

Guo DaLu: “For example, news of spring.”

Yan Qi's tone grew even more tender. "You do not need to ask for news of spring anymore."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because spring has already arrived."

Guo DaLu blinked at him. "Already arrived?" he chuckled. "Where? How come I cannot see it?"

Turning his head to look over at Wang Dong and Hong NiangZi, Yan Qi answered softly, "You should be able to see it. It is right in this place."

Guo DaLu's voice became very gentle also. "You are right. It is in this place," he agreed quietly. But what he was looking at was Yan Qi – Yan Qi's eyes. He had suddenly discovered that spring was in Yan Qi's eyes.

End of Chapter 26

Chapter 27 - A World of Gold

What sorts of people can be called 'sick people' [or a 'patient']? This classification, like many other classifications, has many different definitions. Some people will explain it as: a sick person is someone who has a sickness.

Of course, this definition of 'sick person' is indisputable but it is still not completely correct. Sometimes, people do not have a sickness, but yet, they are still 'sick people'. For example, someone who is injured, or someone who has been poisoned. Can you call them 'sick persons'?

No.

It was still spring.

The third month is precisely the heart of spring, when the grass is long and the oriole flies all around. The snow had all melted. The ground was covered in a blanket of green.

Guo DaLu was standing beneath the shady green, engrossed in his own thoughts. He really was lost in thought because he did not even notice when Yan Qi strolled over to him. Yan Qi could have snuck up and given him a big startle, and in fact, he had actually wanted to. However, once he saw how he looked, he did not have the heart to do it. What sort of look did Guo DaLu have? A face that seemed as if he had not eaten well nor slept enough and that had gotten a lot thinner.

Exhaling a little sigh, Yan Qi walked quietly over in front of him. A faint smile showed on his face. "Hey," he asked softly, "what are you thinking about?"

Guo DaLu lifted up his head to look at him, staring for a long time before he said unexpectedly, "Do you know what sorts of people are called 'sick people'?"

Yan Qi: "People who have a sickness."

Guo DaLu shook his head.

Yan Qi: "Not correct?"

Guo DaLu: "At least it is not completely correct."

Yan Qi: "What answer should I say in order to be completely correct?"

Guo DaLu pondered for a moment before answering, "In a child's eyes, so long as someone is lying on the bed unable to move, then that person is a sick person, yet someone like that does not necessarily have any sort of illness."

Yan Qi: "But you are not a child."

Sighing, Guo DaLu stated, "In my eyes, a sick person is merely someone who spends especially large amounts of money."

Yan Qi: "What sort of sentence is that?"

Guo DaLu: "A true sentence."

What he said really were words of truth. Sick people may be unable to have drinks but they must have medicine. Moreover, not only must they take their medicines, they also have to consume a lot of bupin [natural supplements, usually very expensive] and these items were usually more expensive than wine.

Naturally, Yan Qi knew that those words were true because right then, in their place, there were three sick people. Lin

TaiPing's injuries had not yet completely healed and now, there was HongNiangZi and Wang Dong as well. Yan Qi frowned at him. "Even if it is a true sentence, you still should not say something like that."

There was a bitter little smile on Guo DaLu's lips. "I know I really should not say it, but I have to."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because, at this point in time, I am very quickly going to become a dead person."

Yan Qi: "Dead person?"

A pile of stuff lay before Guo DaLu. That bitter smile was still on his face as he explained, "If things keep continuing on this way, in less than two days, I will have no choice but to throw myself into the river." That pile in front of him was actually a stack of bills.

Those bills were the sort that meant people were demanding payment from him. Yanking out a sheet of paper from the middle of the stack, he read, "Pure, high quality yan wo [*swallows nest; considered a delicacy and good for you], total weight five liang. Cost: fine silver, twelve liang even." He hurled the paper to the ground, then sighed, "I can't believe a nest made by some bird can actually be that expensive. If I had known, it would have been better if we turned into birds ourselves. That way, we could have avoided having all those pharmacy owners coming and pressuring for payments."

Yan Qi grinned, "You already are a bird – a dim-witted bird."

The sigh from Guo DaLu was even longer. "I bet even a dim-witted bird would not agree to manage the bills."

Yan Qi blinked. “Well, who told you to manage them?”

Jabbing a finger at his own nose, Guo DaLu replied, “Me – the dim-witted bird.” It was true; he had said himself that he wanted to take care of the bills. Lin TaiPing, Hong NiangZi, and Wang Dong were all unable to move about. The only two left who could do anything were he and Yan Qi, but yet, the things that needed to be done were many.

“So do you want to manage the household or the bills?” Yan Qi had asked him.

Not even needing to think about the answer, Guo DaLu had immediately said, “Bills.” In his mind, he had felt that managing bills was much more pleasant than preparing medicines or making porridge for the sick. Only now did he realize that he was wrong, extremely wrong. Forcing a smile, he explained, “I had thought that there was nothing in the world that could be easier than dealing with bills.”

“Oh?” Yan Qi blinked at him again.

Guo DaLu: “Because in the previous months, we did not have any bills we needed to manage.”

Yan Qi giggled, “Even if there were, they were just some nonsense bills.”

Guo DaLu: “Exactly.” Sighing, he added, “Back then, when we had money, we would go eat and drink a bit, and when we did not have money, we would just restrain ourselves. Even if we did not eat or drink for the entire day, it still would not be a big deal.”

Yan Qi: “And at the time, at least all of us would try to come up with plans to get money.”

Guo DaLu: “But now, things are different.”

Yan Qi nodded his head slowly. He, too, could not help sighing now as he agreed, "Things truly are different now."

The sick must not be allowed to go hungry and even moreso, they must take their medicines. And so, regardless of whether they had money or not, everyday, there was a fixed set of expenses that they could not avoid. Those expenses were not small either. However, there was not one person coming up with ideas to get money. Yan Qi was busy caring for the sick; Guo DaLu was desperately racking his brain for ways on how to buy things on credit.

"I find one thing very odd, though," Guo DaLu sighed.

Yan Qi: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: "Although I have never muddled my way around jianghu before, I have heard more than a small number of stories about the heroes of jianghu. How come I never heard about any one of them having to worry about money?" He gave a cynical little chuckle before carrying on, "Those people seem to have bundle after bundle of money that they can pull out at any time. That money seems to just fall down from heaven."

Yan Qi contemplated his words for a minute, then remarked, "In the future, if someone tells our story, there will definitely be no mention of us worrying about money either."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because storytellers all seem to think that people do not like to hear stuff like that."

Guo DaLu: "But those are all facts."

Yan Qi: "Facts may be true, but there are not many people who dare to speak the truth."

Guo DaLu: "Why don't they dare? What is there to fear?"

Yan Qi: "They are scared people will not listen."

Guo DaLu: "Could all those storytellers be idiots? Don't they understand that there will be people who like to listen to the truth?" He thought for a moment, then added, "Maybe you get a bigger kick out of those myth or legend-like stories, but true stories are definitely able to move people even more. Stories that have the ability to touch people's hearts are the only ones that carry on forever."

Letting out a slight chuckle, Yan Qi advised, "It would be best if you saved these words for the storytellers to hear."

Guo DaLu: "You are uninterested?"

Yan Qi: "Yup."

Guo DaLu: "What do you want to hear then?"

Yan Qi: "The only thing I want to hear now is how much debt are we actually in?"

Heaving a sigh, Guo DaLu replied, "Not much; it has not even reached ten thousand liang of silver yet."

In some people's eyes, a debt of ten thousand liang was really not all that much. During the time that Guo DaLu had money, this debt would also not have been considered a large amount. The issue lies not in how large the debt is but rather, how much you have.

Yan Qi: "These ten thousand liang worth of bills, are they all urgently in need of payment?"

Guo DaLu: "The people demanding payment are already pressuring me so much that I am ready to throw myself into the river. Do you think it is urgent?"

Yan Qi: "How much do we still have on hand at the moment?"

"Quite a bit." Guo DaLu sighed, "With another three coins, we will have pooled one liang."

Yan Qi stood there at a loss for words. The difference between ten thousand liang and one liang was 9,999 liang. Anyone could do this calculation. So, Yan Qi could only stare off in silence. After a long while, he let out a long sigh and commented, "I finally understand what it means to be poor."

Guo DaLu: "Only now do you understand?"

Nodding, Yan Qi explained, "Because even though we did not have money before, we did not owe anyone any debts either so that could not really be considered as being poor."

"Right now, as long as I do not have to owe any more debts, I would be willing to crawl around on the ground for three days and three nights," Guo DaLu moaned.

Yan Qi: "Sadly, even if you crawled on all fours for three years, you still would not be able to crawl out ten thousand liang."

Guo DaLu: "I don't need ten thousand liang. 9,999 liang will be sufficient."

Yan Qi: "The problem is, how are you going to get 9,999 liang?"

With another sour smile, Guo DaLu said, "I have no idea."

Yan Qi: "Neither do I."

Blinking, Guo DaLu suggested, "Why can we not be thieves?"

Yan Qi: "Because we are not the types that are able to be thieves."

Guo Dalu: "What type of people can?"

Yan Qi: "The inhuman types."

Guo DaLu: "Could we go steal from the rich and give to the poor?"

Yan Qi: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Why not? People who steal from the rich and give to the poor cannot be considered thieves. At most, they are gallant bandits, heroes."

Yan Qi: "Who are you planning to rob?"

Guo DaLu: "Those wealthy but heartless and dishonest businessmen or those corrupt officials who exploit the common people."

Yan Qi: "And after you are done with the robbing, who are the poor that you are going to provide aid to?"

Guo DaLu: "Naturally, we would first rescue ourselves from our own crisis and relieve our own poverty."

"Then that is not being a hero; that is being a b**tard," Yan Qi rebuked. He added, "It is because there are so many people who have these b**tard ideas that there are so many thieves in the world." Perhaps the majority of the world's thieves actually started with these self-deceiving notions.

Guo DaLu thought over it for a minute before forcing a smile. "According to what you are saying, then, it appears that we only have one path left to take."

Yan Qi: "What path is that?"

Guo DaLu: "Not paying."

Yan Qi: "Do you know what sort of people default on their debts?"

Guo DaLu did know, and that is why he sighed again. "People who have no shame."

Yan Qi: "So are you able to do that?"

Guo DaLu: "No." Besides, even if he was able to bring himself to not pay the debts, Wang Dong and the others' injuries had not healed yet, and they still needed to continue with their medicines and supplements. If you defaulted on your current debts, who would be willing to let you borrow from them again?

End of Chapter 27

Chapter 28 - The Way to Making Money

"If that is the case, does that mean we are at a dead end?" Guo DaLu asked with a groan.

Yan Qi: "Who said that we are at a dead end? People have always made their own roads. As long as you have determination, as long as you are willing to make your way, there will certainly be a road."

Guo DaLu: "I understand this principle, and I have said the same thing to others before. Right now, though..." He paused a moment before carrying on, "Right now, I only believe one thing."

Yan Qi: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: "If, today, we are not able to pay back the money that we owe to people, then today is the day that we are going to go hungry."

The world has many good principles. Unfortunately, no matter how good the principle, it still cannot be sold for 9,999 liang of silver. It cannot even be sold for one liang.

A moment ago, it was one person staring off in thought. Now, there were two. Two people staring off at a loss is even harder to bear than one person. Guo DaLu really could not take it any longer. Jumping to his feet, he paced around in a circle seventeen, eighteen times, before crying out abruptly, "I just remembered a saying."

Yan Qi glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "Which saying?"

Guo DaLu: "A very useful saying."

Yan Qi: "What can it be used for?"

Guo DaLu: "At least it can be used to get us out of our crisis."

Yan Qi: "If that is the case, then I want to hear it."

Guo DaLu: " 'Friends have an honourable obligation to open up riches.' I am certain you have heard this saying before."

Yan Qi: "You want to go find someone to borrow money from them?"

Guo DaLu: "Not go find 'someone.' I want to go find a friend."

Yan Qi: "One type of person will have the least friends in the world. Do you know which type of person that is?"

Guo DaLu: "Which type?"

Yan Qi: "The type who goes and asks their friends for money."

Guo DaLu: "I do not intend on seeking out a lot of friends, just one."

Yan Qi: "By the time you have found your friend and opened your mouth to ask for the money, you may discover that you do not even have one friend."

Guo DaLu: "But if it were friends like us..."

Yan Qi: "If it were friends like us, it would not be necessary for you to even open your mouth and ask."

Guo DaLu: "So you believe that there are no friends out there that you can ask to borrow money from?"

Yan Qi: "Not a single one."

Guo Dalu: "But I believe that there is one."

Yan Qi: "Who?"

Guo DaLu: "Sour Plum Soup."

Yan Qi did not say anything, but his expression darkened.

Guo DaLu: "I am not saying that you should go ask. I can go. I can be considered to have helped her before."

With an icy smirk, Yan Qi scorned, "Only one type of person would ever ask to borrow money from a woman."

Guo DaLu: "What type of person are you talking about?"

Yan Qi's voice was frigid. "A fool. Only a fool would believe that a woman would be willing to lend him ten thousand liang."

Guo DaLu: "I know that women are a little more petty and stingy than men, but in her eyes, ten thousand liang should not really be anything at all."

Yan Qi: "Yes, truly not anything. It is just ten thousand liang, after all."

Guo DaLu: "Plus she is not the least bit stingy."

Yan Qi: "Even a more magnanimous woman would not lend money to a man."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because a woman's way of thinking is different."

Guo DaLu: "How so?"

In that chilly tone, Yan Qi stated, "Women always believe that any man who is willing to ask for money from a woman is absolutely pathetic. Therefore, a woman who is willing to lend money to a man is just as pathetic."

Guo DaLu was speechless for a while. With an unexpected little chuckle, he said, "Really, only women are able to understand their own way of thinking. You are not even a woman."

Yan Qi's face grew stony. "Of course I'm not."

Guo DaLu grinned. "So you really do not know either. That is why I still want to give it a try."

Yan Qi: "And what if you are snubbed [literally, run into/bump into a nail]?"

Sighing, Guo DaLu answered, "Even if I do, it will be a stone nail. That is at least better than colliding with other people's iron nails." He gave an unexpected little chuckle and joked quietly, "If there were some gold or silver nails in the world, I would rather collide with them."

All of a sudden, Yan Qi's eyes lit up as he leapt to his feet and shouted, "You have finally said something that is actually useful."

This time, though, Guo DaLu actually paused a moment in surprise before asking hesitantly, "What did I say? How is it useful?"

Yan Qi: "Not only is that sentence actually useful, it really is worth some money too."

Guo DaLu was even more perplexed.

Scooping up seven or eight pebbles from the ground, Yan Qi asked him, "Were you aware that my skill with projectile weapons is not bad?"

Guo DaLu shook his head. "Nope. You have never used any projectile weapons on me."

Yan Qi: "If I used projectile weapons against you, would you be able to catch them?"

Guo DaLu: "Not necessarily."

Yan Qi: "Would you like to give it a try and see?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Yan Qi: "Well, even if you do not want to, you still have to. You have no choice." Using the technique of "Rain of Blossoms Fills the Sky," without warning, the pebbles in his hands were thrown straight at Guo DaLu. They were fired fiercely, without the least bit of civility.

In the art of projectile weapons, there was one technique, "Rain of Blossoms Fills the Sky," that nearly everyone in jianghu knew about or had heard of.

However, the number of people who had seen this technique was not many, and even less could actually execute it. Guo DaLu had now seen it. Not only was Yan Qi able to execute this technique, he was also really quite good.

Like a torrential rain, seven, eight pebbles went shooting over towards Guo DaLu. He spun his body and sidestepped, dodging two or three of the rocks and catching another three or four in his outstretched hand. Still, though, one or

two of them managed to make contact with his body, hitting him so hard that he yelped loudly. Glaring at Yan Qi, he yelled, "What did you mean by that?"

Yan Qi grinned at him. "No real reason. I just want you to make a few thousand liang of silver and bring it back."

Guo DaLu was taken aback for a minute. "How am I going to make all this money?"

"Your hands." Yan Qi gave a little laugh before adding, "Your hands are already very agile. Not many people are even able to catch four of my projectile weapons. You only need to practice a few more times and then, making a few thousand silver liang will be as easy as turning over your palm."

Guo DaLu stared at his own hands. The more he stared, the more confused he became. He honestly could not see how that pair of hands could bring in several thousand liang. Now, if someone wanted those hands to lose several thousand liang, that would truly be as easy as turning over his palm. He had lost a few thousand before in a single dice throw.

Yan Qi was picking up stones again, and Guo DaLu could not help asking, "So what do you actually want me to do? Throw dice and scam people's money?"

Yan Qi guffawed, "Whose money do you think you could scam with your dice throwing? You are the King of Losers."

Guo DaLu: "How are you expecting the King of Losers to win, then?"

Yan Qi: "As long as you are able to catch every one of my projectile weapons in one go, then I guarantee that you will be able to win."

Guo DaLu: “What if I still lose? What do I have that I can lose to other people?”

Sighing, Yan Qi answered, “If you still lose this time, then I’m afraid you are going to have to lose your life.”

A cynical grin was on Guo DaLu’s face as he said, “It seems, anyways, that all I have to lose is my life.”

Yan Qi: “That is why you must find some way to catch all my weapons. If you cannot catch them with your hands and need to use your mouth, then make sure you bite onto them securely.”

To catch projectile weapons thrown using the “Rain of Blossoms Fills the Sky” technique was not an easy feat. Guo DaLu had already gone through three attempts, and his body had endured seven hits that, although they had not been too hard, still left his bones feeling sore.

This time, Yan Qi did not even show a hint of mercy as he picked up stones from all over on the ground. Guo DaLu could only stand off to the side and watch in amazement. Up until this point in time, he still could not figure out what it was that Yan Qi was plotting.

If it had been any other person in his place, they probably would have quit already. But he trusted Yan Qi. He believed that, even if all the people in the world wanted to give him a hard time, in no way would Yan Qi support them.

There were not many pebbles in the courtyard. Yan Qi was already holding a handful, but he still felt that it was not enough and jogged over to gather more along the wall.

Rubbing the spot on his shoulder that was achy and tingling from being struck, Guo DaLu could not help exhaling a

lengthy sigh. He really was not confident that he could catch all those projectile weapons at once.

The breeze carried with it the fragrance of flowers. The peach blossoms on the other side were ready to bloom soon. Guo DaLu lifted up his head. All of a sudden, he noticed Wang Dong sitting by the window and gesturing at him.

Waiting until Yan Qi had turned his back to him to pick up some more pebbles, Guo DaLu dashed over. The two of them, one on the inside and the other on the outside of the window, gestured and waved with their arms and legs, all the while whispering away about something that no one else knew.

Yan Qi could only wait. After waiting for a long while, he finally saw Guo DaLu walk back over nonchalantly, his hands behind his back and a smug expression on his face. Wang Dong still sat by the window, facing over towards them. He was smiling, a very mysterious sort of smile. Unable to contain himself, Yan Qi called out, "Wei! What are you two talking about?"

"Which two are you referring to?" Guo DaLu asked.

Yan Qi: "You and Wang Dong."

"Oh, you mean Wang Dong," Guo DaLu said with a feigned realization. "He told me to tell you that he wants to eat spareribs simmered with turnips tonight."

Anyone could tell that he was fibbing. It was as if there was a sign hanging from Guo DaLu's face whenever he was lying. Yan Qi glowered at him and said icily, "The one who is lying should be careful that his teeth are going to get knocked out."

Grinning, Guo DaLu invited, "Come try."

Yan Qi: "Fine."

This time, he not only threw a lot more stones, he also threw them a lot harder. The greater the strength behind the throw, the faster the stones hurtled toward Guo DaLu. With a spin of his body, two shiny silver objects that looked similar to the nets with handles that children used to catch tadpoles suddenly appeared in Guo DaLu's hands.

More than ten pebbles shot rapidly toward him, but nearly all of them got scooped like tadpoles into the nets. At most, only two or three managed to escape. Guo DaLu had easily dodged all of them.

This time, even Yan Qi's eyes seemed to bulge out a bit in astonishment. Wide-eyed, he asked, "What sort of gadget are those?"

Guo DaLu beamed, "What do you think of these two devices? Are you awed or not?"

Yan Qi: "Did Wang Laoda teach this to you just now?"

With a look that showed he was immensely pleased with himself, Guo DaLu replied, "Even if he taught me, it still required someone smart and talented like me to actually learn it."

The corner of Yan Qi's mouth twitched in amusement. "Since when did you become so smart?"

"I never was dense to begin with," Guo DaLu chuckled. "As long as it is an amusing trick, I will learn it perfectly the instant I am taught."

Yan Qi stretched out his palm. "Let me see."

Guo DaLu quickly pulled his hands behind his back. "Can't."

Yan Qi: "Why can't you?"

Guo DaLu: "Wang Laoda said that the secret must not be divulged."

Yan Qi: "Fine. Let's see you try again." His motions were even faster and more remarkable this time. More than ten small stones suddenly seemed to come alive, like they had sprouted wings and grown eyes. They seemed to specifically seek out the weakest places on Guo DaLu's body to hit.

But the two nets in Guo Dalu's hands appeared to be waiting for them. This time, only one of the stones managed to slip by the nets. With loud laughs of delight, Guo DaLu shouted, "You should be in awe of me now."

Yan Qi stared at him until, at last, his lips curled up into a smile also. "It seems you really are not dense."

Even more proud of himself, Guo DaLu told him, "To be honest, I never really put much effort into practicing techniques for catching projectile weapons only because... only because... Can you guess what the reason is?"

Yan Qi: "Nope."

Guo DaLu boasted, "It was because my pair of hands is naturally faster than other people's and my eyes are sharper also, so I never really needed to learn."

Yan Qi added nonchalantly, "And so that is why you suffered badly at the hands of Big Centipede."

Guo DaLu's face did not even turn pink. A smile was still on his lips as he replied, "That does not count. Tell him to come try now." With a sparkle in his eyes, he chuckled, "I have

heard that the brave men of jianghu all have a mighty-sounding title. I have thought of one now for myself that is rather befitting.”

Yan Qi: “What sort of title?”

Guo DaLu: “Thousand-Armed Buddha, Untouchable Phantom’s Shadow, the Swift-Handed Great Drunken Hero.”

Yan Qi could not stop himself from bursting out into giggles. “I have a title for you as well that is even more suitable.”

Guo DaLu: “Let’s hear it.”

Yan Qi: “Clumsy Hands, Clumsy Feet, Crawls Around Drunken, King of Losers, the Great Dim-Witted Bird. Don’t you think that this title is rather befitting?”

End of Chapter 28

Chapter 29 - Gold and Face

This house's front door opened out to the south, and its pair of ringed door knockers glinted in the sunlight. Guo DaLu spotted those rings the instant he entered the lane. A long time passed, yet his eyes were still fixed on them, as if he had never before seen ringed door knockers in his life. Actually, he very rarely in his life had the chance to see something so peculiar.

Every household had a front door; every front door had ringed door knockers. This point was not the least bit peculiar. What was peculiar, though, was the door knockers on this house's front door were actually made of gold.

All the while that Guo DaLu had been fixated by the door knockers, Yan Qi had been watching him. Lately, there almost seemed to be a rope around these two that connected them together. Wherever Guo DaLu was, Yan Qi would be there also. After a long time, Guo DaLu finally exhaled and commented, "This family must be the new-rich."

Yan Qi blinked at him curiously. "The new-rich?"

Guo DaLu: "Only the new-rich would do something like this."

Yan Qi: "Something like what?"

Guo DaLu: "Something that makes people laugh so hard that their front teeth fall out."

Yan Qi: "You are wrong."

Guo DaLu: "How am I wrong?"

Yan Qi: "This family is not only not 'new-rich' but moreover, they are, in fact, one of the few large, influential families of the martial society."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

"It may be very tacky and funny-looking to have ring door knockers made from gold, but when he does it, no one will find it the least bit funny," Yan Qi told him.

"I find it very funny," Guo DaLu argued.

Yan Qi: "That is only because you do not know who he is."

Guo DaLu: "I know."

Yan Qi: "You honestly know?"

Guo DaLu: "He is a person, a person who reeks of the stink of copper, whose wealth is massive but his manner is crude, and who is worried that other people do not know that he has lots of money. I do not know this person, nor do I want to befriend him. I want nothing to do with anything that people of this sort choose to do."

Yan Qi grinned at him. "But unfortunately, someone of this sort now has something to do with you?"

"What does he have to do with me?" Guo DaLu huffed. "He is not one of my loaners."

Yan Qi chuckled, "We are not so poor that we have reached that extent."

Guo DaLu breathed a sigh of relief. "So, don't tell me that you made me travel for half a day and hurry to this place just to see this pair of door knockers."

Yan Qi: "Not quite."

A worried expression started to come over Guo DaLu again as he stared Yan Qi. "I know the idea you have could not possibly be a nice one. That is why you have not been willing to be frank and just say it out."

Letting out an amused laugh, Yan Qi reassured him, "Don't worry. In any case, I will not sell you to these people. I would not want to part with you." His face suddenly seemed to redden.

Guo DaLu appeared to grow even more concerned. "If someone has not done something to make his conscience feel guilty, he would not blush."

Yan Qi: "Who is blushing?"

Guo DaLu: "You."

Yan Qi turned his head away quickly. "I think there is something wrong with your vision."

Guo DaLu's eyes lit up abruptly, and he blurted, "I understand now."

Yan Qi: "What do you understand?"

Guo DaLu: "It must be that this family has a daughter who is an old maid. You want me to use the 'handsome man ploy.' "

A "pfft" slipped out and Yan Qi could not stop himself from giggling. "You think that you are very handsome?"

Guo DaLu: "Maybe not exceedingly handsome, but I am precisely the type of man a woman would fancy the instant she laid eyes on him."

"You are like a horse that does not know its face is long," Yan Qi said with a sigh.

Guo DaLu exhaled a sigh as well as he remarked, "It is a pity that you are not a woman, otherwise you would definitely fancy me, too."

Yan Qi's cheeks seemed to grow pink again, but he purposely drew his face into a scowl. "If I was a woman, right now, I would give you a solid kick straight into the gutter."

Guo DaLu: "No matter what you say, I am not going to fall into your trick."

Yan Qi: "Fall into what trick?"

Guo DaLu: "That old maid must be ugly and weird and maybe even has a face covered in pockmarks, so that is why she still is not married. Even if her dowry is eight hundred silver liang, you should give up on any hope that I would take her as my wife."

Throwing a sideways glare at him, Yan Qi asked icily, "What if she is both young and beautiful?"

Grinning widely, Guo DaLu answered, "Then that can be discussed. You are my good friends after all. For my friends, I am willing to do anything."

Yan Qi: "Right now, I only want you to do one thing. Would you be willing or not?"

Guo DaLu: "Go ahead and say it."

Yan Qi: "I just want you to go look at your own face's reflection in the gutter, then go buy a stinky tofu and smash your head into it."

The lane they were in was quite wide, and suddenly, a large carriage drawn by four horses came tearing into it. But even

though the street was wide, if Guo DaLu and Yan Qi had not skirted out of the way quickly, they would still have been struck. Guo DaLu glowered angrily at the carriage that had gone galloping by, and grumbled resentfully, "This street does not belong solely to him. Based on what right does he get to barge and rampage about as he please?"

Yan Qi: "Based on only one point."

Guo DaLu: "Which point?"

Yan Qi: "Based on the fact that this lane does belong solely to him." Guo DaLu was taken aback for an instant. Only then did he notice that there really was only one household in the lane.

The carriage had pulled to a stop outside the door. From within what had been a quiet entryway, more than ten people suddenly came rushing out with hurried footsteps. With the fastest speed possible, a few of them unsaddled the horses that had been pulling the carriage. The remaining ones shoved the carriage onto the carriageway beside the stone steps, then pushed it back inside.

A head protruded out briefly from the within the carriage window and cast a glance towards Guo DaLu and Yan Qi. Guo DaLu did not have a chance to catch a clear view of the person's face. The only impression he had was that this person's eyes seemed to be particularly bright compared to normal people. "From the looks of it, it seems like Jin DaShuai [Commander Jin] has returned," Yan Qi commented.

"From the looks of it, it seems like Jin DaShuai [Commander Jin] has returned," Yan Qi commented.

Guo DaLu: "Who is Commander Jin?"

Yan Qi: "He is the one whom you said has massive wealth but a crude manner."

Guo DaLu: "And, sure enough, my words were not wrong." He gave a cool smirk. "Commander Jin. You only need to hear his name and you already know what kind of person he is."

Yan Qi: "I do not see how wealthy people cannot be good people."

Guo DaLu: "But on what basis is he allowed to call himself 'commander?' "

Yan Qi: "Number one: because he carries himself with the air of a commander. Number two: because other people like to call him commander."

Guo DaLu: "It appears that you have a high regard for him."

Yan Qi: "Am I allowed to have a high regard for him?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes, of course you are. But am I allowed to not have a high regard for him?"

Yan Qi: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Why not?"

Yan Qi: "Haven't you always thought highly of yourself?"

Guo DaLu: "Heh heh."

Yan Qi: "So you should also think highly of him. You two are basically the same type of person - very great-hearted and very 'dalu' [straightforward, carefree, does not take things to heart, etc]. "

Guo DaLu: "Heh heh."

Yan Qi: "What is 'heh heh' supposed to mean?"

Guo DaLu: "Heh heh means that I do not believe it."

Yan Qi: "When you see him, you will have to believe it."

Guo DaLu: "I never wanted to see him."

Yan Qi: "But you do not have a choice. You must see him."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Because if you do not see him, then you are going to have to face the expressions of the people you owe money to." What is worse to look at than the face of the people you are in debt to?

Guo DaLu's brow creased together as his thoughts turned to these people. "You..... you couldn't possibly want me to open my mouth and ask to borrow money from a person that I do not even know?"

Yan Qi: "I know that the skin on your face is not quite that thick yet."

Guo DaLu: "Then why are you telling me to go see him?"

In a low tone, Yan Qi explained, "Wulin has many strange people, for instance, that Sour Plum Soup's father."

"Are you referring to the lao qianbei [(respectfully) old elder/senior] who is called 'The Stone God'?"

Yan Qi nodded. "Do you know how the name 'Stone God' came about?"

Guo DaLu: "It is because he uses weapons of stone, and he uses them very proficiently."

“Correct answer.” Yan Qi carried on, “Stone tools and weapons were used by people of ancient times because at the time, humankind had not yet discovered how to smelt iron and produce steel. Nowadays, hundreds and thousands of bizarre weapons exist, but yet he still prefers to use those awkward and heavy stone weapons. Isn’t he a strange character?”

Guo DaLu: “Yes, but... what does he have to do with Commander Jin?”

Yan Qi: “Commander Jin is the same. He, too, is a strange character, and the weapons he uses are unusual also.”

Guo DaLu: “What weapons does he use?”

Yan Qi: “He will only use ones made of gold, and furthermore, they must be pure gold.”

Guo DaLu’s eyes were blinking now. He appeared to be starting to comprehend what Yan Qi was intending.

Yan Qi: “The weapon he is most adept in using is his Golden Bow, Godly Pellets. The pellets are fired in succession. In a single assault, a total of twenty-one of them will be shot out. Very few people in jianghu are able to evade this attack.”

Guo DaLu: “The pellets are also made of gold?”

Yan Qi: “Pure gold.”

Guo DaLu: “You want me to somehow get into a fight with him, catch his gold pellets, and bring them back to pay the bills?”

With a wide smile on his face, Yan Qi replied, “Supposedly, each one of his gold pellets weighs several liang, and in addition, each attack will launch twenty-one of them. You

only need to be able to catch three or four of these attacks and then you will not need to face the expressions of all your creditors.”

Shaking his head adamantly, Guo DaLu objected, “I will not do it. I will absolutely not do something like that.”

Yan Qi: “Why?”

Guo DaLu: “There is no ‘why.’ Won’t do it means won’t do it.”

There was a twinkle in Yan Qi’s eyes as he gave an offhand chuckle. “Oh..... I get it. You are scared...”

“What would I be scared of?” Guo DaLu snapped loudly.

In a casual tone, Yan Qi answered, “Of course you are not scared of him. You are just afraid of getting fat.”

Guo DaLu was taken aback by this, and he repeated, “Getting fat?”

Yan Qi: “Gold may be softer than iron, but each pellet weighs five or six liang, and if it hits you, it would still hurt quite a bit.”

Guo DaLu: “Hmph.”

Yan Qi: “Once it hurts, it will swell up; once it swells, you will look fat, and it does not look nice when you look fat.” He let out another nonchalant laugh. “So even if you do not go, I will not blame you. If you suddenly get fat, I would be worried that people would say that you took some sort of pig fattening drug anyway.”

Guo DaLu glared at him for a long time. Scowling, he grumbled, “Funny. So frigging funny! ”

Yan Qi: "If a person suddenly swelled up, then that would really look funny." Guo DaLu threw another angry stare at him before turning his head and walking away. Yan Qi grabbed him and held him back. "Where are you going?"

"I am too thin from being starved lately," Guo DaLu replied coldly. "I should have been thinking of ways to get fat anyways."

Yan Qi's face broke into a sweet smile. "Don't tell me you are planning on just barging inside and picking a fight."

Guo DaLu: "How else can I get him to fight me? Do I have to get on my knees and beg him?"

"Even if you get on your knees and beg, he still may not fight," Yan Qi told him with a laugh.

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Grinning, Yan Qi explained, "After all, twenty-one pellets are worth quite a bit of money. He has not lost his mind so why would he use them on just any random person? Plus, if by chance he does kill someone, then that would not be very fun at all."

Guo DaLu nearly screamed with frustration. "You were the one who was forcing me to go just a moment ago. Now, the person stopping me from going is also you. What trick are you trying to play?"

Yan Qi: "It is not that I do not want you to go. It is just that, if you want to pick a fight with Commander Jin, you have to have a plan."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of plan?"

Yan Qi: "Think about it: what sort of person is able to force Commander Jin to make a move?"

Guo DaLu: "I cannot think of any, nor can I be bothered to think about it."

Yan Qi: "Only two types of people."

Guo DaLu: "Which two?"

Yan Qi: "The first type would obviously be his enemies. If his enemies came knocking on the door, of course he would strike out immediately. Unfortunately, though, there is not a single bit of enmity between the two of you." He heaved a long sigh. There was a look on his face that seemed as if he was filled with regret over this point.

A dark cloud covered Guo DaLu's face as he muttered, "So do you want me to go steal his wife from him to create some enmity between us first?"

Yan Qi giggled, "Supposedly, his wife is fat and ugly and what's more, she is a tigress. If you really do take her away, he may actually be grateful to you."

Guo DaLu: "Ha ha. Very funny."

Yan Qi: "Fortunately, aside from that, there is another method."

Guo DaLu: "Humph! "

Yan Qi: "In wulin, no one is ever willing to bow their heads and show weakness to another person.

And so, if a person seeks him out in a forthright and honourable manner and challenges him to a contest of martial arts, he will have no choice but to fight." He reached

unexpectedly into his garments and pulled out a bright red card [bai tie; a card that pays one's respects when you request to see a person] and said charmingly, "But of course, this person has to have a name for himself, for example, someone like you, Clumsy Hands, Clumsy Feet, Crawls Around Drunken, King of Losers, the Great Dim-Witted Bird.... Do you agree?"

A card, entirely red in color and very elegant-looking. Written on it, in a neat script, was a very resounding name: "Thousand-Armed Buddha, Untouchable Phantom's Shadow, the Swift-Handed Great Drunken Hero, Guo DaLu respectfully pays a visit."

The doorkeeper of the Jin family mansion was already quite old, and his entire face radiated the look of a sly, old fiend. After accepting the card, he had glanced over it, and not even a trace of astonishment had crossed over his face. He merely asked unenthusiastically, "And where may this Great Hero Guo be right now?"

Guo DaLu: "He is right here."

Only then did the old doorkeeper bother to lift his head and glanced over Guo DaLu a couple of times. "So you, sir, are Guo Daxia [Great Hero Guo]. My ignorance, my ignorance."

Guo DaLu: "Hmph."

The old doorkeeper stared at him with a look where his skin seemed to smile but the facial muscles did not smile [phony smile] and laughed drily, "Could it be that Great Hero Guo, you are here to challenge our master to a contest in the art of projectile weapons?"

"How did you know?" Guo DaLu blurted in surprise.

The old doorkeeper smiled like an old fox as he answered in a detached tone, "Each month, there are always a few 'great heroes' who come here. If I still did not know by now what you sir are here for, then that would truly be strange."

With a serious look on his face, Guo DaLu instructed, "If you already knew, then why have you not sent word that I am here?"

Assessing him up and down a few more times with his eyes, the old doorkeeper remarked, "It appears that Great Hero Guo is not drunk yet today?"

Guo DaLu replied coldly, "The Great Drunken Hero does not necessarily have to be drunk every day."

Old doorkeeper: "Then I would advise Great Hero Guo that it would be best if you turn around and go back."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

That smile on the old doorkeeper's face became even more infuriating as he said unemotionally, "Because the number of 'great heroes' who come here is really too large. Our master said that he grows dizzy the instant he sees a great hero. He had instructed us in the past that he will see any person. Even bastards, bandits, and pickpockets are all allowed to be invited inside, but as for 'great heroes'... heh heh... he absolutely refuses to see any one of them."

The card was back in Yan Qi's hand again.

Guo DaLu's entire face was red with fury. "This was all your brilliant idea. Never in my life have I been so humiliated before. And especially that old fox! It was as if he views me as a thief. His entire face has that skin-smiles-but-the-muscles-don't-smile look that just maddens me to death."

Yan Qi blinked at him. “Why didn’t you slap him a couple of times?”

Guo DaLu: “Because I am a thief to begin with. My conscience is guilty. The fact that he did not give me a couple of slaps is already very courteous of him. How could I still have the nerve to beat him up?”

Yan Qi laughed in reply. Naturally, he was much more pleasant to look at than the old doorkeeper. Once Guo DaLu saw him laugh, his anger seemed to subside a little bit. “So the face on your skin actually is not that thick. It is even slightly thinner than a city wall,” Yan Qi giggled.

Letting out a sigh, Guo DaLu said with a bitter smile on his face, “That’s why all I want to do right now is hurry away from here, the faster the better.”

But Yan Qi pulled him back again. “What is your hurry? I still have another plan.”

Guo DaLu looked terrified. With an anguished expression, he groaned, “Is it possible for you to not offer any more ideas?”

Yan Qi: “No.”

Covering his ears with his hands, Guo DaLu whimpered, “Then is it possible for me not to listen?”

Yan Qi: “No.” Seizing Guo DaLu’s hands, he yanked them off his ears, and chortled, “This plan is even better than the last one. You have to listen.”

There was an agonized smile on Guo DaLu’s face. “Your not-so-good idea is already quickly making lose all the face I ever had. I don’t think I could handle this new great idea of yours.”

Yan Qi: "You really think that this whole situation is very humiliating?"

Guo DaLu could only sigh.

Yan Qi: "Let me ask you: if Big Centipede was using projectile weapons to attack you and you caught them, would you give them back to him?"

Guo DaLu: "I am not crazy. Why would I give them back to him? For him to use them on me again?"

Yan Qi: "That's exactly correct."

Guo DaLu: "What is exactly correct?"

Yan Qi: "If he used projectile weapons to attack us and we were able to catch them, that would all be a result of our own skill and ability, correct?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Yan Qi: "When a person earns money through his own abilities, there is nothing shameful or humiliating about that, correct?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Yan Qi: "How many points do we have now which are correct?"

Guo DaLu: "Three."

Yan Qi: "So do you have anything else you would like to say?"

Guo DaLu: "No." Yan Qi: "Then would you still like to hear my idea or not?"

With another sigh and a pained smile, Guo DaLu answered, "I am simply dying to hear it."

In reality, it is very humiliating to buy things on credit while knowing perfectly well that you have no money to pay back, yet Guo DaLu still forced himself to do it. He had always been a person who needed to save face. Why, then, would he do something like that?

Naturally, it was for his friends. If, within a lifetime, a person is able to befriend someone who is willing to lose face for him, then even if he should die, his life would have been worthwhile already.

End of Chapter 29

Chapter 30 – The Old Fox and the Great Drunken Hero

Guo DaLu really did not enjoy swearing and cursing, nor did he really know how to insult people, but his voice was extremely loud. As he stood before the front door of the Jin mansion hurling insults, even Yan Qi, who was outside of the lane, could hear him clearly.

A large white poplar tree grew near the entrance to the lane, and beneath the tree was a stone block. Yan Qi was standing on that stone block listening to Guo DaLu.

A look of appreciation covered his face, as if he was listening to a famous actor singing in an opera. That was because he was not the person Guo DaLu was cursing; Guo DaLu was insulting Commander Jin.

“You, surnamed Jin! You should be a human being. Why are you hiding away inside your house like a frightened turtle hiding its head? What are you afraid of? Could it be that your nose was knocked crooked by someone and you do not dare show your face to others now?”

The more Yan Qi listened, the more proud he felt because he was the one who taught Guo DaLu to say all those things.

“Since Commander Jin refuses to see you, then you will stand in front of his door and insult him until he does come out.”

This tactic was called “battle through verbal abuse.” It was actually an age old battle strategy that was, in fact, usually very effective. In a situation where two armies were facing off, if one stood firm and refused to come out, the other army would send someone out to do “battle through verbal abuse.”

This person would mock and ridicule the opponent until they could bear it no longer and finally came out to do battle head on, at which point, the 'battle through verbal abuse' would be considered a success. Reportedly, Zhuge Liang had insulted Cao Cao in the same manner¹³.

At first, Guo DaLu had not been willing to cooperate with the plan, but Yan Qi's one sentence finally convinced him: "Even Mister Zhuge could use this type of strategy; why can't you?" This was actually a type of battle strategy, not something a scoundrel would do.

So, off Guo DaLu went to throw insults, and he did so heartily. As long as Commander Jin heard his curses, then it would truly be a strange thing if he did not come out.

Strange things occur every year.

When Guo DaLu's voice was bellowing insults, even people three streets away could hear him. But no hint of activity came through the front door of the Jin mansion. Could Commander Jin be deaf? His hollering had not caused anyone to come out yet before his impatience first took over. He had already cycled through several times the words that Yan Qi had taught him.

The people inside were not sick of listening to them, but he was already sick of yelling them. He wanted to think of some new and fresh insults to shout, yet sadly, he could not think of any.

At that moment, that sly, old doorkeeper sauntered out leisurely carrying a chair in his arms – a very comfortable wicker chair. The old fox actually went and placed the chair right in front of Guo DaLu. As he set it down lightly, his face carried on it that skin-smiles-but-the-muscles-don't-smile look but not even a trace of anger.

Guo DaLu was taken aback, and he could not help asking, "What are you doing with that?"

The old doorkeeper smirked, "Our household's master specifically instructed me to deliver this to you."

Guo DaLu: "Has he heard me insult him or not?"

Old doorkeeper: "Even though our master's age is no longer young, his ears have not yet gone deaf."

Guo DaLu: "What does he mean by having you deliver this chair to me?"

Old doorkeeper: "He is concerned that Great Hero Guo is overly tired from shouting, and therefore, invites Great Hero Guo to sit while you continue with your yelling. He also said, should Great Hero Guo you grow thirsty from your efforts, you only need to order me.

Whether it be tea or wine that you request, I will immediately bring it to you." He sneered again before continuing, "Although many great heroes have come to this place, none of them have cursed as superbly as Great Hero Guo, so our master hopes that Great Hero Guo will continue cursing for a while longer. If you could actually shout your insults a little louder, that would be even better."

Dazed, Guo DaLu stared at that wicker chair for half a day. Without saying a word, he turned his head and left.

Behind him, the old doorkeeper was still laughing loudly as he called out after him, "Great Hero Guo, you are leaving? Pardon me for not seeing you out. If you have time in the future, please feel free to come back whenever you would like. We not only have tea and wine here but also medicines to treat laryngitis."

Guo DaLu was so maddened that his nose was quickly going to become crooked. Yan Qi looked at him, shaking his head as he chided, "I told you to go provoke people, and instead, you come back provoked half to death. Why put yourself through that?"

Guo DaLu fumed hatefully, "If you saw that old fox's face, I would be surprised if he did not infuriate you to death."

Yan Qi: "No matter what he says, just treat it as bull***t and then you won't get angry, right?"

Guo DaLu: "It was more like no matter what I said, he treated it as bull***t."

Yan Qi blinked in surprise. "Did he really tell you that you were saying bull***t?"

Guo DaLu: "Even though he did not say it out, the look on his face was even more hateful than if he had."

Yan Qi: "And you could actually stand it?"

Guo DaLu: "Even if I couldn't, I still had to."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because I was saying bull***t to begin with." Yan Qi laughed. Naturally, he was much more pleasant to the eyes than the old doorkeeper, but it seemed that he was no longer as nice to look at as before. Guo DaLu stared at him with a scowl on his face. "How many other brilliant ideas do you actually have? You might as well just say them all out at once."

Yan Qi: "You still want to listen?"

Guo DaLu: "I might as well listen to them. With each one I listen to, that is one down."

Out of the blue, Yan Qi exhaled a breath and smiled bitterly. "But alas, I do not have any ideas either."

Guo DaLu replied sarcastically, "How could a genius like you suddenly have no ideas?"

Sighing, Yan Qi said, "You said that doorkeeper is a sly, old fox. In my opinion, though, Commander Jin is the real sly, old fox."

Guo DaLu's tone was chilly. "Didn't you say that he is always very greathearted and generous?"

Yan Qi: "When he really does agree to enter into a fight, if he is not able to hit you, then he must compensate you with several hundred liang of gold. Even if he injures you, he will give you several hundred liang of silver to cover your medical expenses."

With another sigh, Yan Qi remarked, "I think Commander Jin must have been fooled a few times lately and has learned some lessons, so he finally understands this theory. If that is the case, why would he be willing to be duped again?"

Guo DaLu: "He was not duped, but I was."

Yan Qi beamed at him with a sweet smile. "Really, you cannot be considered as having been duped. At least you got a very satisfying opportunity to curse and swear at someone."

Guo DaLu: "Could I curse and swear one more time?"

Yan Qi: "Who do you want to curse at?"

Guo DaLu: "You."

All of a sudden, a horse and rider came galloping over. Guo DaLu was already so annoyed that he was uninterested in everything and could not be bothered to turn his head around to even cast a glance.

However, Yan Qi, who was standing across from him, had lowered his head, as if he did not want the rider on the horse to see him. Unfortunately, the rider's eyes were extremely sharp. The horse had just streaked into the alley when, with a long neigh, it reared unexpectedly on its hind legs.

The rider on the horse had outstanding horsemanship. With a sharp tug on the reins, this person was already leaping upwards and somersaulting in midair before coming down lightly in front of Guo DaLu. The garments this person wore were redder than a plum, so red they dazzled the eyes.

End of Chapter 30

Chapter 31 - Commander Jin

Sour Plum Soup. Mei RuNan.

A brilliance flashed in front of Guo DaLu's eyes. "It is you," he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Smiling, Mei RuNan said, "I was just going to ask you. Why have you two come here?"

Yan Qi interrupted, "We are waiting for you."

Mei Ru Nan: "How did you know I would be coming?"

Yan Qi: "I know how to deduce."

Mei RuNan smiled prettily as she gave a light punch to Yan Qi. "You," she chortled. "I cannot understand a single word of anything you say because you are a..."

Yan Qi quickly reached over and covered her mouth with his hand. His face seemed to have turned a slight hue of pink as, in an anxious tone, he warned, "If you dare utter a bunch of rubbish, just you wait and see if I will tear your lips off."

Guo DaLu could only stare in bewilderment. Yan Qi had rejected Sour Plum Soup's marriage proposal; Sour Plum Soup should have despised him. Why, then, when these two met now, were they being so affectionate towards each other?

Mei RuNan's eyes were twinkling. She looked at him, then looked at Yan Qi before covering her mouth in a little giggle. "Fine. I will not say anything, but I am not going to listen to you either. Xiao Guo's [Little Guo] words are more reliable than yours." She then immediately followed up by saying, "Xiao Guo, let me ask you: what are you two doing here?"

Guo DaLu gave a couple of dry coughs and put on a forced smile. "We are not here to do anything. We are merely... merely out for a stroll. Strolling over here cannot be considered illegal, right?"

Mei RuNan laughed, "I was already frequently coming here to play when I was still in my mother's belly."

Yan Qi glanced over at Guo DaLu. Guo DaLu appeared to want to say something, but he held it back.

Mei RuNan: "So you are scheming some sort of plan? Did I guess correctly?"

Yan Qi: "No."

Mei RuNan gave a regretful sigh. "Well then, there is no need for me to tell you my plan."

This time, Guo DaLu could not help jumping in again and asking, "What sort of plan?"

Mei RuNan replied in a nonchalant tone, "Since you guys are not here for that reason, then even if I say it out, it will be for nothing."

Guo DaLu: "What if we are here for that reason?"

Mei RuNan: "Then maybe I can think of a plan to help you out."

Guo DaLu: "Then I will tell you. You have guessed completely correctly. You are brilliant; practically like a living Zhuge Liang."

A "pfft" escaped from Mei RuNan and she chuckled in reply, "I had known all along that you are more truthful than he is."

Guo DaLu: "But what about your plan? It is not an option for you to not tell us now."

Mei RuNan crossed her hands behind her back and started to pace slowly back and forth with measured steps, as if she really thought that she was Zhuge Liang.

Yan Qi's voice was icy. "I had known all along that your words would not be dependable."

"You can do whatever you want to try and provoke me," Mei RuNan told him with a smile, "but it will not work in the least bit."

Guo DaLu: "What is it you want before you are willing to tell us?"

Yan Qi: "A condition."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of condition?"

Mei RuNan batted her eyes at him. " 'Profits that come into your hand must be divided in half upon meeting.' You should have heard this saying before."

Guo DaLu laughed, "So you actually want to be 'the bad who picks on the bad.' "

Mei RuNan: "My heart is not that mean. I do not really want half of everything. A 30/70 split is good enough."

Guo DaLu: "What if your plan does not work?"

Mei RuNan: "Whether it works or not, you will be able to test it out right on the spot."

Guo DaLu told her with a chuckle, "In my opinion, you should change professions and sell dog skin medicinal paste

instead [a saying used to describe someone that deceives people as a way of making a living].”

Mei RuNan: “Are you two going to sell this dog skin medicinal paste with me?”

Guo DaLu: “It would be pointless if we don’t.”

Mei RuNan smiled prettily. “And if I don’t sell it, that would be pointless too.”

A high wall.

Mei RuNan led Yan Qi and Guo DaLu into a dark alleyway in the back. This alley was much narrower than the lane out front. At the end of it was a narrow black door.

Yan Qi: “This is the back door of the Jin household?”

Mei RuNan nodded. “Behind this wall is the rear courtyard of the house. Once spring arrives, Jin Dashu [Uncle Jin] will move his quarters from the warm pavilion in the front to this rear courtyard.”

Guo DaLu was listening.

Mei RuNan: “I am going to jump over the wall into the house, and you have to follow behind and chase me.”

Guo DaLu: “And then?”

Mei RuNan: “And then I will go find Uncle Jin, tell him that you are harassing me, and ask him to deal with you for me.”

Guo DaLu: “And then?”

Mei RuNan: “Uncle Jin has always doted on me. When he sees you chasing me, he will definitely use his ‘pellets in rapid succession’ on you.”

Guo DaLu: "And then?"

Mei RuNan: "There is no 'and then' after that. As long as you are able to catch his 'pellets in rapid succession,' you will immediately become a little wealthy man."

Guo DaLu: "And what if I am not able to catch them?"

Mei RuNan: "Then you may become a dead person."

Guo DaLu: "Dead person?"

Mei RuNan nodded. "If he knows that you are harassing me, he will certainly not be courteous to you when he attacks."

Guo DaLu: "And you?"

Mei RuNan: "Me? Of course I can only watch from the side."

Guo DaLu: "If I get rich, you will come find me to split the loot. If I die, you at least ought to buy a coffin for me."

"Uncle Jin will supply a coffin for you," she answered.

Guo DaLu: "And so, no matter what happens to me, there will be no loss to you."

Mei RuNan chortled, "Of course there won't; otherwise, why would I offer up ideas to you?"

Sighing, Guo DaLu grumbled under his breath, "Great idea. It is so amazing how you could think of such a wonderful idea."

Mei RuNan: "Women will never enter into business arrangements in which there will be a loss to them."

"Women. Ai... women," Guo DaLu sighed again.

Mei RuNan: “So are you going to do it or not?”

With a forced smile, Guo DaLu replied, “If I don’t do it, then it would just be senselessly not doing it.”

“If you die, you cannot blame me,” Mei RuNan warned.

Guo DaLu countered, “If I really do die, I would not be able to thank you fast enough. Why would I blame you?”

Puzzled, Mei RuNan repeated, “Thank me?”

Guo DaLu: “Dead people do not have to face their creditors nor listen to the long-winded babbling of women. Isn’t that much better than being alive and exhausted from hardships?”

Mei RuNan: “Are you for real?”

Guo DaLu: “No.”

Guo DaLu never felt that living was a hardship. He had lived a life filled with happiness. Regardless of the situation, he was always able to find something meaningful to do, and regardless of what he did, he would do it enthusiastically. As a result, he was always very happy.

Should it really come to a time when he wanted to die, then that must mean that, even if the world’s population had not completely perished yet, there were certainly not many people left.

A one zhang [1 zhang = 10 feet], four feet wall would already be considered rather tall for a normal household, but this wall was at least two zhang , eight feet tall.

Mei RuNan lifted her head and assessed it. “You are certain that you can get up there?”

Guo DaLu: "So-so."

Mei RuNan: "What is 'so-so' supposed to mean?"

Guo DaLu: "It means that I can probably get up there because, although I am not certain I can, I have the courage to try."

Mei RuNan: "That can be found in the secrets of lightness kungfu too."

Guo DaLu was not boasting. Regardless of what he did, his biggest secret lay in one word: courage.

Mei RuNan looked at him and sighed, "I just hope that you do not crack open your head."

Guo DaLu: "Even if I crack open my head, I will still go up."

"Alright." Mei RuNan gave a pretty smile and instructed, "I will go up first for a look. Once I give you the signal, you have to hurry up and chase after me."

Guo DaLu: "Do you have confidence that you can get up there?"

"No." She let out a little giggle. "I neither have confidence nor courage, but I have a method."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of method?"

Mei RuNan: "This method." All of a sudden, she jumped up onto Guo DaLu's shoulders, then from his shoulders jumped onto the wall.

With a groan, Guo DaLu muttered, "Why is it that women always use methods that take advantage of men?"

In a casual tone, Yan Qi answered, "Because most men are just too stupid."

Guo DaLu: "Are you not a man?"

"I am a man, but I'm not stupid," Yan Qi chuckled.

Mei RuNan was signalling to him from up above. Guo DaLu positioned himself, ready to leap up into the air, but then he stopped again and turned around to look at Yan Qi. "What are you waiting for?" Yan Qi asked.

Guo DaLu: "Once I leave, I may really turn into a dead person this time. So..."

Yan Qi: "So what?"

Guo DaLu: "So, you should tell me that secret of yours now."

Yan Qi: "Nope."

Guo DaLu: "Why not?"

Yan Qi: "Because you are definitely not going to die this time."

Guo DaLu: "You are certain?"

Sighing, Yan Qi said, "People say you are stupid, and you really are." As he gazed at Guo DaLu, his eyes suddenly grew very tender, and he said gently, "If I was not certain, how could I allow you to go?"

"You are so stupid." Mei RuNan stared at Guo DaLu and shook her head. "You are so stupid it is unbelievable."

Glaring at her, Guo DaLu snapped back, "On what basis are you allowed to say that to me?"

Mei RuNan: "Because you just are stupid."

Guo DaLu: "And what aspect of me is stupid?"

Mei RuNan: "Every aspect. Why can you not become just a little bit smarter?"

Guo DaLu: "Am I allowed to not be smart? Am I allowed to be a little stupid?"

Mei RuNan: "Of course you are." She reached out and patted his shoulder as she said in her enchanting voice, "Many girls actually like guys who are a little dense, so feel free to be stupid."

Guo DaLu: "Are you one of those girls?"

"I am not, nor do I dare," laughed Mei RuNan while casting a glance down at Yan Qi, who was standing at the foot of the wall. Still giggling, she flew away like a sparrow. Obviously, she did not actually know how to fly, but her form and motions were indeed beautifully light and graceful like a swallow. Guo DaLu stood atop the wall, a foolish little expression on his face as he stared after her.

Biting down on his lip, Yan Qi stomped his foot and shouted, "Dolt! Why are you not hurrying up to follow after her?"

Guo DaLu gazed down at him. The look on his face seemed like he had suddenly perceived something but yet, had not figured anything out. It was as if he wanted to say something, but yet he did not say word. In the end, he finally asked, "Will you wait for me?"

Yan Qi: "You dolt. Of course I will wait for you."

Guo DaLu: "How long will you wait?"

Yan Qi: “No matter how long, I will still wait.”

Only then did Guo DaLu break into a smile. “Don’t worry. I will certainly give pursuit, and I will definitely not pursue the wrong person.”

A dazed look seemed to be on Yan Qi’s face as he stood at the base of that wall. Perhaps it was not a dazed look; perhaps it was a look of intoxication. Gentleness filled his eyes; red had risen on his cheeks. If this was not intoxication, what was it? But what was he intoxicated about?

Commander Jin.

Someone who was called commander, regardless of whether he was a real commander, would at least carry the air of one.

Commander Jin’s air was very impressive. He was very tall, taller than most people by at least half a head. And not only was he tall, he was strong and sturdy with a broad build.

End of Chapter 31

Chapter 32 - The Gold and the Lesson

People who are tall and burly always appear to have a particularly imposing manner. Even though he was already in his fifties, he still stood there with his back very straight and his eyes sparkling with light. His beard, although not too long, was still very thick and black.

The clothes he wore, naturally, had been tailored so they fit him perfectly, and the materials they were made of were magnificent and expensive. Even if you did not know that he was Commander Jin, you would definitely not mistake him for a nobody.

Guo DaLu had figured out in one glance that he was Commander Jin. At the moment Mei RuNan had fled into the house, he had been standing beneath the peach tree in front of his room, admiring the new blossoms and quietly reciting poetry. This Commander Jin appeared to be a refined and cultured man.

When Mei RuNan saw him, her eyes suddenly seemed to fill with tears and she lunged forward, throwing her entire body into his arms. She whispered something to him. Guo DaLu could not hear any of her words but he could see fury flood Commander Jin's face. "Is that him?" Commander Jin barked. Mei RuNan's head was nodding nonstop as her tears flowed relentlessly.

Guo DaLu could only watch, feeling amused and in awe of her at the same time. "All women seem to be born with the ability to act." As he looked again, he saw Commander Jin's enraged expression intensify.

Glaring fiercely at Guo DaLu, he bellowed, "You dare to run away?"

“I am not running away,” Guo DaLu answered. “Am I not standing here nicely?”

“Good, good... you are good!” Commander Jin snapped. He was so angry that he was unable to speak.

Guo DaLu: “You got it right this time. I have always been good.”

Commander Jin let out a loud roar. “Old man [laofu; referring to himself] is going to be maddened to death!”

Guo DaLu: “That’s good. Maddening one to death means there’s one less out there.”

Commander Jin’s eyes were rolling up into his head so that the whites showed. He looked as if he was going to pass out at any time from anger. Fortunately, Mei RuNan had rushed over just in time to support him. At some point, she had also retrieved a massive, sparkling gold bow from within the house along with a heavy-looking pouch made of muntjac skin.

As Commander Jin took ahold of the great bow, his entire bearing immediately seemed to transform, becoming filled with energy and even more imposing. He even seemed to suddenly grow much younger. Guo DaLu had originally intended to provoke him, but now he dared not be careless. A famous martial arts master with a famous weapon in hand. If you dared to be careless in front of him, you were basically giving your life away.

He heard Commander Jin give a loud yell. “Catch!” The instant this word was shouted out, the whole sky was filled with dancing rays of golden light. Like a torrential rainstorm that carried with it a fierce gale, the lights shot towards Guo

DaLu. Sure enough, Commander Jin's Godly Pellets in Rapid Succession were not fun to play with.

Fortunately, Guo DaLu was prepared. Though Commander Jin's pellets came soaring rapidly, he also caught them just as quickly. If gold came falling down from the sky, no one would be too slow in catching it. Plus, he truly did have some real kung fu abilities.

Mei RuNan was standing off to the side watching. She suddenly called out, "The gluttonous pig is the first to be slaughtered."

It was not certain whether Guo DaLu had not heard her or had not understood what she was trying to say. He had two very large sacks on him. As the nets in his hand filled up with his catch, he would empty them into those sacks. Commander Jin's Pellets in Rapid Succession fired twenty-one at a time in a single round of attacks. After every round, however, he needed to pause for a moment to take a breath. This gave Guo DaLu the opportunity to take the golden pellets in the nets and shove them into his sacks. But no matter how large a sack may be, it will never be like the extravagant desires of humans – it will never be bottomless.

When Guo DaLu left, his sacks were nearly overflowing with golden pellets. He had waited until the bags were full before he made his escape while Commander Jin was catching his breath. Of course, he had wanted to use the fastest speed possible to leave that place, but for some reason, his motions were not as fast as they had been previously.

He was lucky that Commander Jin's body size was so large and his age was not young either. Even if he gave chase, he would not necessarily be able to catch up.

Guo DaLu seemed to recall that there had been a well near the corner of the wall where he had jumped down. It turned out his memory was actually not bad, and surprisingly, his vision had not gone blurry from the brilliant gold light so he was able to quickly locate that well. Yan Qi, naturally, was waiting for him outside.

“There is no ‘and then’ after that. As long as you are able to catch his Pellets in Rapid Succession, you will immediately become a little wealthy man.” A wealthy man would not need to worry about facing the expressions on his loaners’ faces.

As Guo DaLu caressed the gold pellets in his bags, he could not stop a giggle from escaping his lips. He raised his head to take a quick look at the top of the wall. Taking a couple of steps back, he spread his arms out and, using “Sparrow Pierces the Clouds,” he jumped up with all his might. He had used this same move to propel himself onto the wall the last time, so of course he was very confident he could do the same now.

But for some reason, something was not right this time. He had put even more force into this jump now than the one previous, yet even at the peak of his jump, there was at least six or seven feet between him and the top of the wall. His head narrowly missed smashing into the wall, and he almost really did crack it open. Although he avoided splitting his head open, he still ended up falling flat on his back.

“What just happened?” Could it be that his lightness kung fu had suddenly deteriorated? Guo DaLu rubbed his head, all the while thinking that this was creepy, and he could not understand it. And so, if he could not understand, then he would just have to try again. The result was still the same: once more, he nearly put a hole in his skull, and he ended up flat on his back yet again.

All of a sudden, he noticed that, as he was leaping upward, the sacks at his waist seemed to have a pair of hands inside them that were yanking him back down. Of course, the sacks did not have hands inside, only gold pellets. Guo DaLu had finally figured out what was going on. One gold pellet was approximately four liang [1 liang = 50 grams]; forty gold pellets were ten jin [1 jin = 0.5 kg].

Anyone who suddenly gained an extra twenty, thirty jin on his body would find his lightness kung fu greatly reduced. If he had just caught a couple less rounds of attacks a moment ago, he may have already jumped over the wall by now and met up with Yan Qi.

But none of this mattered. There would always be a way to get around this complication. The grass along the edge of the wall was thick and tall. "If I hide these gold pellets in the grass and leaves, no one will ever know." Who would ever consider that someone would toss gold that he had successfully secured into his hands into a bunch of grass? Guo DaLu snickered again before immediately untying the two bags from his waist and hiding them in the thick grass. And then, he jumped up onto the wall.

He really admired himself. He felt he did things with decisiveness, much creativity, and lots of boldness. If it had been anyone else, right then, they would still be at the foot of the wall racking their brains and maybe Commander Jin would have already caught up to them. It would be bizarre if someone with such creativity like him did not make it rich in the future.

Yan Qi was waiting for him outside. In one breath, Guo DaLu recounted to him the entire event, and then, unable to restrain a grin he asked, "Are you in admiration of me?"

“It is a little too early to be in admiration of you,” Yan Qi told him.

Guo DaLu: “Too early?”

Yan Qi: “The gold pellets are still in someone else’s house right now.”

Guo DaLu laughed. “That’s simple. Isn’t there a long coil of rope on Sour Plum Soup’s saddle?”

Yan Qi nodded. He had seen it there a little while ago also.

Guo DaLu: “So I am going to go back in there now and I will fasten those two sacks onto the rope. You will be on this side of the wall and will heave them out. What do you say? Simple?”

Yan Qi: “Simple.”

Beaming, Guo DaLu said, “A person only needs creativity and then, no matter how difficult a situation may be, it will turn into something very simple.”

Yan Qi could not help letting out a little giggle. “And so you have always been in admiration of yourself.”

Guo DaLu: “I have no choice but to admire myself.”

Mei RuNan’s horse was tied to a tree in front of them, and as expected, there really was a coil of rope on the saddle. Guo DaLu waited on the outside of the wall for a long while. Hearing no activity on the inside, he finally jumped back in.

Sure enough, those two sacks had not moved from where he had hidden them. He was extremely pleased with his own judgment. He watched as, from the outside, Yan Qi pulled the two bags up onto the top of the wall, then from there

down to the other side. He then heard Yan Qi call in a low voice, "I have caught them. Hurry and come out."

Only then could Guo DaLu relax. The great task had been successfully accomplished. As he imagined himself going to pay off his debts and how those creditors would fawn over him, he could not hold back a grin that originated from within his heart. And so, he leapt easily up onto the wall. This really was an example of "in a happy occasion, a person is filled with vigor."

Yan Qi was already standing beneath the tree by the entrance to the lane, waiting for him beside the horse. As he walked over, Sour Plum Soup also came running out from the front door. Guo DaLu could not help asking, "Where is Commander Jin?"

Pursing her lips, she giggled, "He was nearly maddened to death by you. He has gone back to his room to lie down now."

Guo DaLu: "Are you not worried that he will get suspicious with you sneaking out right now?"

Mei RuNan: "No worries. After I split the loot, I still have plenty of time." With a charming smile, she added, "It is a good thing that he has so much money he will not be able to spend it all, so it cannot really be considered a crime if we share a little portion for us to spend."

Yan Qi suddenly piped up, "We had an agreement. It would be a 30/70 split, right?"

Mei RuNan: "Absolutely right."

Yan Qi: "Good. You take the seventy. We only want thirty."

Mei RuNan was silent for a moment in surprise. Guo DaLu, though, nearly jumped into the air as he exclaimed, "What?! You want to give her the seventy percent?"

In a casual tone, Yan Qi replied, "If she wants one hundred percent, then I will give it all to her."

Guo DaLu: "You... are you suffering from heat stroke? Do you feel a little woozy?"

Yan Qi: "The one with the muddled head is you, not me." He tossed the two sacks unexpectedly over to him. Guo DaLu had not been paying attention and was not able to catch them on time. The pellets inside the sacks spilled out all over the ground. Not gold pellets. Iron pellets. Guo DaLu stared at those shiny black pellets rolling all around, his eyes seeming to bulge out from their sockets. Yan Qi's voice was still nonchalant as he asked, "So now you should know who has the muddled head."

"But I... I had seen without a doubt that those were gold pellets just a moment ago," Guo DaLu stuttered.

Letting out a sigh, Yan Qi remarked, "It seems that this guy not only has a muddled head but poor eyesight also."

Guo DaLu stood motionless for a long while in astonishment before finally grabbing one of the bags and giving it a shake. He suddenly saw a sparkly gold pellet roll out. Only one real golden pellet. Mei RuNan picked it up and looked it over. All of a sudden, she cried, "Look. There are words engraved on it."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of words?"

There was a very peculiar expression on Mei RuNan's face as she stared at the pellet. After a long time had passed, she

finally heaved a lengthy sigh and, with a forced smile, told him, "You should look for yourself."

There was only a single row of characters etched on that gold pellet: "If a person is too greedy, then even the gold that has come into his hands will turn to waste."

The gluttonous pig is always the first to be slaughtered. As he thought of these words from Mei RuNan and stared at the sentence engraved on the pellet, the look on Guo DaLu's face was as if he had eaten three jin of mouldy lotus. Yan Qi looked at him, then looked over at Mei RuNan. Smiling bitterly, he commented, "Commander Jin must have known right from the start what our purpose in coming was."

Mei RuNan: "Mm."

Yan Qi: "In addition, he must have also seen through to the fact that you were helping us deceive him."

Mei RuNan: "Yet he pretended to be oblivious because..." She paused a moment before continuing, "Because he has always been a very generous and 'dalu' person. Even if he knew that we were trying to scam a little of his money for our own use, he did not mind. But unfortunately..." She cast a glance over at Guo DaLu and did not carry on further.

Guo DaLu, though, finished off her thought for her. "Unfortunately, I was too greedy, as if I would not be satisfied until I had taken away all of his golden pellets."

Mei RuNan: "That cannot really be blamed on you."

Guo DaLu: "If you don't blame me, then who else would you blame?"

Mei RuNan: "Every person has weaknesses. Regardless of who it may be, a person cannot avoid having instances of

greediness at some point in time.”

Yan Qi: “Besides, your greed was not for yourself. If you had not been doing it for your friends, you would not have racked up all those debts.”

Guo DaLu let out a sudden chuckle. “Really, you do not need to console me. I am not feeling upset.”

Mei RuNan: “Oh?”

Guo DaLu: “All that gold may have turned into scrap iron, but this trip of mine was not completely without gain.”

Mei RuNan forced out a laugh. “True. You at least still have the one gold pellet that was left.”

Guo DaLu: “What I gained is not that one pellet.”

Mei RuNan: “What is it then?”

Guo DaLu: “A very good lesson.” He gazed down at the characters etched on that gold pellet and, in a slow tone, explained, “To me, perhaps this lesson has much more value than all the gold in the world put together.”

Mei RuNan stared intently at him. A long while passed before a pretty smile touched her face. “I now finally understand why somebody likes you so much. It is because you really are a very lovable person.”

Guo DaLu: “You only just realized that?”

Mei RuNan: “Mm.”

Grinning widely, Guo DaLu said, “I knew that a long time ago.”

“Unfortunately, though, there is something that you do not know,” Yan Qi interrupted unexpectedly.

Guo DaLu: “What is that?”

Yan Qi: “In the eyes of those people you owe money to, the only time you are lovable is when you go to pay off your debts. Do you know what they will do to you if you have no money for them?”

The grin had disappeared off of Guo DaLu’s face long ago by now. With a pained expression, he shook his head. “Nope.” He only knew for sure that, no matter how good the lesson may be, it still could not be used to pay any debts.

Blinking, Mei RuNan asked them, “You owe people a lot of money?”

Yan Qi: “Mm hm.”

Mei RuNan: “How much do you owe?”

Yan Qi gave a light sigh. “Not much. Just ten thousand liang or so.”

Mei RuNan looked as if she had sucked in a lungful of cold air. She stood there motionless for a long time before announcing abruptly, “Uncle Jin must still be waiting to scold me. I cannot dawdle any longer. See you later.” Before she finished saying this, she had already hopped up onto the horse.

As Guo DaLu watched her gallop off with a hurrying slap to the horse, he could not help heaving a long sigh. “Why is it that once people hear that you are in debt, they will immediately flee?” he grumbled.

Yan Qi pondered this for a moment before answering, "Because she wants to help you learn a very good lesson too."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of lesson?"

Yan Qi: "If a person wants to live a happy life, it would be best if he is not deep in debt."

Slowly, Guo DaLu nodded his head in agreement. He added, "If you want your friends to like you, it would also be best if you are not deep in debt."

This truly is a good lesson and deserves to be taken to heart by everyone. But what if it was for your friends that you are deep in debts?

"I think it would be better if you lay low and sneak away to some other place to hide for a few days," Yan Qi suggested.

Guo DaLu opened his eyes wide and glowered at him. "You want me to run away?"

Yan Qi: "You promised people that you would pay off everything in two days. How can you go back emptyhanded?"

Guo DaLu: "Do you think I would do something that was so disgraceful?"

Yan Qi: "But you have a bunch of debts."

Guo DaLu: "Owing debts is one thing; running away is a completely different matter. Debts can be repaid at some point in time, but if you run away from your debts, then you are not even worthy to be a human being."

Yan Qi eyes fixed intently on him as he smiled alluringly and said, "You truly are a human being."

"And furthermore, a very lovable one. Just a little poor, that's all," Guo DaLu chuckled.

This was a matter of principle. If a person wants to honour his own principles, then at times, things may not be very easy. However, if you are able to stand by your principles in any sort of circumstance, then you will discover that, not only will you always have peace of mind when you are alive, but even when you die, your eyes will close in peace.

So long as a person is able to have peace of mind in life and in death, then what consequence is it whether he is poor or not? Of course, if someone is able to be a little wealthier, that is not a bad thing either.

"Are you rich or poor?" This question is not important. The truly important question is, "Are you worthy to be a human being?"

Wealthy Manor always looked the same. Regardless of how you looked at it, you would not be able to see any hint of wealthiness. This morning, though, there seemed to be something different about it. There were four mules stopped in front of the manor today along with several smartly-dressed servants resting in the shade of the trees outside the front door.

Yan Qi had spotted them from a distance and he could not help giving a little sigh. With a cynical smile, he commented, "So it seems your loaners are already inside waiting for you."

Guo DaLu: "Mm."

Yan Qi: "How are you planning on getting rid of them?"

Guo DaLu: "There is only one thing I can do."

Yan Qi: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: "Tell them the truth." Rays of light from the newly risen sun shone upon him. His face was forthright and honest and looked as if it was also emitting a certain sort of radiance. He carried on, "I plan on being very frank and telling them that, even though I do not have any money to pay them now, I will think of ways and I will pay them back in the future.... This may not be a great plan, but I really cannot think of anything else."

Yan Qi's eyes were fixed on him. "Of course you cannot think of anything else," he said with a slight smile, "because that is the best possible plan. There is not a better plan in this world."

There were a total of six creditors. Six creditors stood in the courtyard, waiting.

Once Guo DaLu stepped inside, he immediately said in a loud voice, "Sirs, my sincerest apologies. Although I do not have money to pay you at the moment, I..."

He did not have a chance to finish before someone cut him off. A shopkeeper who was surnamed Qian jumped in and asked, "Does Guo Daye ["sir" or "mister"; used often to address a patron] think we are here to demand payments?"

Guo DaLu was taken aback. "That is not what you are here for?"

Shopkeeper Qian beamed, "We were afraid that the supplies here were insufficient so we purposely hurried here to bring more to Daye."

“But... but I owe all of you money,” Guo DaLu replied hesitantly.

Another shopowner whose surname was Zhang rushed in to answer first. “Your debts have all been paid off by someone already.”

Smiling apologetically, Shopkeeper Qian told him, “That really was just a small sum.”

Stunned, Guo DaLu stood there for a long while. At last, he could not help wondering, “Who paid all of it for me?”

“To be honest, we do not know either,” Shopkeeper Zhang answered with a chuckle.

Even more puzzled by this, Guo DaLu asked, “How is it that even you do not know?”

Shopkeeper Qian: “When I arose out of my bed this morning, I saw several piles of money on the table outside...”

Guo DaLu could not help interrupting to ask, “Several piles? How can money be talked about as piles?”

Shopkeeper Qian: “Because not all the money there was the same. Some bore the seals of Jinan while others had the seal of the capital city, and they were sorted into separate piles. However, beneath each pile was a slip of paper that wrote very clearly that it was to pay off Guo Daye’s debts.”

Shopkeeper Zhang: “It must be friends of Guo Daye who knew that Guo Daye has been a little tight on cash lately, and so they specially brought some money here. They were scared, though, that Daye would not accept it, so then they sent it straight to my humble little establishment.”

Shopkeeper Qian smiled ruefully. "Guo Daye's friends must all be good men of jianghu who are loyal and value brotherhood. We may be small businesses, but we are not petty people who are swayed by self-gain."

Shopkeeper Zhang gave another apologetic smile as he explained, "So that is why we rushed over here first thing this morning." Of course they needed to rush there right away. Having encountered personages of jianghu who could go in and out of their houses whenever they pleased, how could they dare to not butter up to them? Plus, there was lots of money that they could get out of it.

Guo DaLu was bewildered and unable to make sense of any of it. Even Yan Qi's voice was astounded as he asked, "How many piles of money in total were there that you accepted?"

Shopkeeper Qian: "Three piles altogether. Not only was there enough to pay off all the bills, there was some left over too."

Shopkeeper Zhang: "So, whatever Guo Daye may need for the next two months, please just feel free to come take it from my little shop."

Shopkeeper Qian smiled. "But now, we do not dare trouble you any longer. We shall give our farewells."

Each one of them then bowed respectfully and withdrew out of the manor. Even after they had stepped past the front door, they were still sighing and whispering amongst themselves. "I did not imagine that Guo Daye would have so many good friends."

"Obviously, that is because Guo Daye is always a loyal friend himself."

“Making friends has always been about loyalty and brotherhood in exchange for loyalty and brotherhood. A friend like Guo Daye, I, too, would be willing to befriend him.”

Only after everyone had left was Guo DaLu able to breathe out a long breath. “Am I really a very loyal friend?”

Yan Qi batted his eyes at him and, with a grin, answered, “It seems like it. Otherwise, why would someone pay your debts for you?”

Guo DaLu: “So it turns out that not everyone will flee when they hear that you owe a bunch of money.”

Yan Qi: “Very true.”

Guo DaLu sighed, “But where did these very loyal friends of mine suddenly come from?”

Yan Qi: “You cannot think of any?”

Guo DaLu: “Even if you split open my head, I wouldn’t be able to think of any.”

Yan Qi: “Then there is no need to think.”

Guo DaLu: “Why?”

Yan Qi: “Because what those people said makes sense: making friends has always been about loyalty and brotherhood in exchange for loyalty and brotherhood. They paid your debts today, naturally, because you did something for them in the past that a good friend would do.”

The smile on Guo DaLu’s face was cynical. “But why is it that I still cannot think of who it may be?”

Yan Qi: "There are many possibilities. For example, Red Ant, Madam Wei, Mei Rujia, or even those bandits that had deceived you. If any of them knew that you were being pressured for money to the point that you were ready to throw yourself into the river, they possibly could have secretly paid the debts for you." He suddenly added, "Even Commander Jin and Sour Plum Soup are possibilities."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

"Because you are a very good friend," Yan Qi told him in a charming voice, "and a very lovable person."

Laughing, Guo DaLu mumbled to himself, "Perhaps it really was them. I did not think they would still remember me..."

His laughter was filled with happiness and gratitude. He was grateful but not because they helped him to pay off his debts – he was grateful for their friendship.

As long as friendship is present in this world, there will forever be light. Look! The sun was shining upon the earth at that very moment. Everywhere was sparkling with a golden light, as if Heaven had specially cast a slice of gold down for the people who knew to treasure friendship.

This has always been a world of gold. There is only one thing that matters: do you know how to discern what is genuine gold, what is truly worth treasuring?

End of Chapter 32

Chapter 33 - Commander Jin's Questions

There is a certain type of person who seems fated to live much more happily than other people. Even problems as big as the heavens he could set off to one side. Guo DaLu was this sort of person.

Who paid off his debts for him? Why would they do that? In his eyes, these issues had stopped being issues a long time ago, and so, the instant he lay down in bed, he fell fast asleep. He slept all the way until the afternoon and only awakened when Wang Dong came to his room.

It was still difficult for Wang Dong to move about so the instant he walked in, he found a very comfortable place and sat down. But even if his movements were unhampered, regardless of where he was, he still would immediately find the most comfortable place and seat himself.

No matter whose room it may be, there are very few places more comfortable than the bed, and therefore, Wang Dong told Guo DaLu to pull his legs up while he leaned himself sideways on Guo DaLu's heel. Guo DaLu tossed a pillow over to him so that he could prop it against his back, then rubbing his eyes, asked, "What time is it now?"

Wang Dong: "Still early. There is still more than half a shi chen [more than an hour] until it is time for dinner."

Guo DaLu sighed and groaned, "Really, you should have just let me sleep for another half a shi chen."

Wang Dong also sighed. "What I find strange is, how can you actually sleep?"

Guo DaLu seemed more perplexed than him. Opening his eyes, he asked, "Why would I not be able to sleep?"

Wang Dong: "If you were willing to use your brain a bit and actually think, maybe you wouldn't be able to sleep."

Guo DaLu: "What is there to think about?"

Wang Dong: "There's nothing?"

Shaking his head, Guo DaLu said, "Seems like there is nothing."

Wang Dong: "You already know who paid everything for you?"

Guo DaLu: "In any case and regardless of who paid it for me, the debts have been paid off already. If he does not want his identity to be revealed, what is the point of me thinking about it?"

Wang Dong: "Can you not use your brain to think for a bit?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes, of course I can." He really did ponder for a moment before he carried on, "The most likely person who paid everything for me would be Madam Lin." They had told Wang Dong about their encounter with Madam Lin after.

Wang Dong: "Madam Lin is the same person as the Madam Wei that you spoke about before?"

Nodding, Guo DaLu explained, "Since she knows that Lin TaiPing is here, then of course, at any point in time, she would send people to scout things out here. Once she learned that we were owing on a bunch of bills, naturally, she would send someone to pay them for us." He paused a moment before adding, "However, she did not want Lin

TaiPing to know that she had found this place so that is why she tried to conceal the truth from us.”

Wang Dong: “Sounds quite reasonable.”

Guo DaLu beamed back at him. “Of course it is reasonable. Even though I am too lazy to use my brain sometimes, it does not mean that it is any worse than other people.”

Wang Dong: “Aside from Madam Lin, who is a second person who could have repaid everything for you?”

Guo DaLu: “There is an eighty percent certainty that it was Sour Plum Soup.”

Wang Dong: “Why would it be her?”

Guo DaLu: “When I saw her flee the instant I told her I had a bunch of debts, I was thinking it was rather bizarre because she never seemed to be that sort of person.”

Wang Dong: “So you suppose that she went back to borrow money from Commander Jin and then hurried in front of you to pay everything off for you first?”

Guo DaLu: “That is right. It’s because she has always fancied Yan Qi, but she was also afraid that Yan Qi would not accept this gesture from her so she deliberately did it this way.”

Wang Dong: “But how would she know which businesses you owed money to?”

Guo DaLu: “That would be very easy to find out. You should know how clever a girl Sour Plum Soup is.”

Slowly, Wang Dong nodded his head. “That also sounds rather reasonable,” he said at last.

Guo DaLu grinned at him. "See. Isn't this issue really very simple? I did not even need to use the effort that would be required to blow away some ashes, and I have already thought of two possibilities."

Wang Dong: "Don't forget there still is a third person."

Guo DaLu: "This person surely is..." As his words reached this point, he suddenly could not continue. He had originally thought of many people who could be possibilities, but as he thought about it carefully, it did not seem likely that it was any of these people.

Wang Dong: "Those petty bandits who tricked you before, even if they do not think of you as some sucker and fool and even if they really do feel grateful to you in their hearts, they still would not have that much money to have paid off your bills."

Guo DaLu: "Those people were so poor that they practically could not even afford to wear pants. Otherwise, why would I have taken compassion on them?"

Wang Dong: "And neither can you count Mei Rujia. He took a fist in his stomach from you. He is already being very courteous by not returning a couple of punches."

The smile on Guo DaLu's face was forced as he responded, "So even if I was pressured to the point of death, he still would not shed a single tear over it."

Wang Dong: "It would not just be more convenient for him to merely shed some tears but a lot cheaper for him too."

Guo DaLu: "So it is definitely impossible for the third person to be him."

Wang Dong: "Not only is it impossible for it to be him, it is impossible for it to be any other person either."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because even if people know that you are here, they could not possibly know that you were being pressured to pay debts."

Guo DaLu: "What if someone heard about our clash with Cui MingFu and Thirteen Sabres and knew that we had sustained some injuries so they decided to hurry over here?"

Wang Dong: "And for what reason would they come here?"

Guo DaLu: "Maybe they wanted to watch the excitement, or maybe they wanted to rush here and help us as a way to repay our kindness."

Wang Dong: "Repay kindness?"

Guo DaLu: "For example, those Ma Yi [Ants] could have come to repay our kindness for not killing them."

At last, Wang Dong nodded his head. "That is very reasonable also."

With a smile on his face, Guo DaLu concluded, "So since it is reasonable, that means there is no issue, right?"

Wang Dong: "That is where the real issue is." The expression on his face was very somber, very serious.

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from asking, "The real issue? What issue is that?"

"If it is possible for people to come here to watch the excitement or rush here to repay kindness, then it is also

possible that people could come here to cause us trouble or seek revenge,” Wang Dong explained.

“Seek revenge?” Guo DaLu repeated.

Wang Dong: “You believe that we have shown a kindness towards the Ants by not killing them, but maybe they actually now view us as their enemy? You only recall the instance when we let them go free; why did you not think about the moment when we completely kicked their a**es?”

Guo DaLu was speechless.

Wang Dong: “Besides, Cui MingFu and Thirteen Sabres may also have some very loyal friends who may rush to this place to avenge them when they hear that they were trounced here.”

“That is very reasonable,” Guo DaLu agreed with another sigh.

Wang Dong: “You may not have forged your way through jianghu before, but that is not the case for us. It is unavoidable for anyone who has spent time making their way in jianghu to somehow unintentionally end up offending some people. If these certain people learn of my whereabouts, they, too, may hurry here to settle some old scores.”

Guo DaLu exhaled a long breath and smiled bitterly. “It seems my brain really is not very bright.”

Wang Dong: “But these people still cannot be considered as the biggest issue.”

Guo DaLu got a big scare hearing this. “Even that can’t be considered the biggest issue?”

Wang Dong: "The biggest issue is, since many people already know about our activities, then that indicates that, regrettably, we have become famous." Heaving a great sigh, he lamented, "Once a person becomes famous, troubles big and small will follow very quickly."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of troubles?"

Wang Dong: "All sorts. Troubles that you cannot even imagine."

Guo DaLu realized, "For instance, someone hears that your martial arts are very profound and wants to come here to seek you out for a duel. Even if you do not want to fight him, he will think of all sorts of ways to force you so that you have no choice but to make a move." The smile on his face was self-mocking as he added, "I do understand this point."

Wang Dong: "You understand?"

Sighing, Guo DaLu admitted, "It is just like how I forced Commander Jin to fight. We just never thought that our retribution would come so soon."

Wang Dong: "Besides people who want to engage in martial arts duels with you, there are other people who may come and request your aid or ask you to solve their problems or borrow money for travel expenses. Regardless, these people could come find you at any time, any second.

You will never know when they will be at your door asking for you." Exhaling another sigh, he remarked, "Once a person has become famous in jianghu, I'm afraid it will not be a very easy task if he would like to continue on living his days in peace and quiet."

Guo DaLu let out a long breath as well and mumbled, "So it turns out that being famous is not really something to be

happy about.”

“Possibly only one type of person would think that being famous is a happy thing,” Wang Dong told him.

“People who have not yet become famous,” Guo DaLu stated in response.

Wang Dong said unexpectedly, “Actually, the people who are really in trouble may not necessarily be you or me.”

Guo DaLu: “You are alluding to Yan Qi and Lin TaiPing?”

Wang Dong: “Yes.”

Guo DaLu: “Why would they have more troubles than us?”

Wang Dong: “Because they both have secrets that cannot be spoken about with other people.”

Guo DaLu suddenly hopped up from the bed and shouted, “That’s right! Yan Qi really does have a big secret that he just will not tell me.”

Wang Dong: “Up until now, you still have not been able to guess it?”

Guo DaLu: “Does that mean you have figured it out?”

Breaking out into a chuckle, Wang Dong teased, “It appears that not only is your brain not all that bright, your eyes also...” He broke off unexpectedly. Someone had arrived.

Guo DaLu also immediately heard the sound of someone entering the courtyard just outside. Not just one person. Slipping down slowly from the bed, he asked in a measured tone, “What you said really is true. People have come looking for us at our doorstep.”

Wang Dong could only put on a forced smile in response. This was because he had not thought that these people would come so quickly.

What sort of people had arrived? And what sort of troubles would they bring to them?

Five people in total had arrived. The four individuals in the back had very strong, husky builds, and the clothings they wore were very splendid. Looking at them, they appeared fierce and grand. However, relative to the person in front, these four individuals suddenly seemed to become four little chicks. In truth, the person in front was not much taller than them, but he carried with him an indescribably commanding aura.

Even if he stood within a crowd of ten thousand people, you would still be able to identify him in a single glance. Striding forward confidently as he looked around with a proud and imposing manner, he swaggered into the courtyard without even bothering to knock on the door, as if he was a general returning to his own home after hundreds of battles.

Obviously, Wang Dong knew that this place was not that person's home. Guo DaLu knew this as well. He had actually been planning on rushing out. If trouble came looking for them at the door, he was always the first to dash forward. But this time, as soon as he saw this person, he immediately shirked back inside.

Frowning at him, Wang Dong asked, "You know this person?"

Guo DaLu nodded.

Wang Dong: "He is Commander Jin?"

Guo DaLu: "You know him too?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Guo DaLu: "If you do not know him, how would you know that he is Commander Jin?"

Wang Dong: "If he is not Commander Jin, then who else could possibly be Commander Jin?"

With a bitter smile, Guo DaLu agreed, "True. He really does have the look of a commander."

Commander Jin was standing in the courtyard now, his hands clasped behind his back as he surveyed every direction. "This courtyard should be swept," he commented unexpectedly.

The people following behind him responded submissively, "Yes."

"The China Roses and peonies over there need to be watered a bit, and the grass needs to be clipped," Commanded Jin ordered. "The wicker chairs under that tree should be changed out for some stone benches. And also prune those branches slightly."

His attendants answered again, "Yes."

Wang Dong had been inside watching from through the window. All of a sudden, he asked, "So, whose house is this?"

"Yours," Guo DaLu told him helpfully.

Sighing, Wang Dong said, "I had originally believed, too, that this is my house but now, I am a little unclear on that."

Guo DaLu could not stop himself and wanted to laugh but instead, his brows knit together as he wondered, "Why

hasn't Yan Qi come out yet?"

"Maybe he is just like you; he saw Commander Jin and his conscience felt a bit guilty," Wang Dong speculated.

Guo DaLu objected, "Commander Jin does not even know him. Why would he feel guilty?"

Wang Dong's eyes were sparkling as he suddenly asked, "Did you ever consider a certain question?"

Guo DaLu: "Which question is that?"

Wang Dong: "Yan Qi's technique in launching projectile weapons can already be considered first class, and his skill in catching projectiles weapons should certainly be quite good also."

Guo DaLu: "I would think it would be quite good."

Wang Dong: "Well then, why did he not go find Commander Jin himself? Why did he want you to go instead?"

Guo DaLu paused. "This... I never really thought about this."

Wang Dong: "Why wouldn't you think about it?"

There was a cynical smile on Guo DaLu's lips. "Because... because as long as it is something that he wants me to do, it seems like it is perfectly justified that I ought to be the one who does it."

Wang Dong stared at Guo DaLu like a big brother looking at his little brother – a little brother who had had his tang hulu [candied haws (or other fruit) on a stick] tricked away from him by someone.

Guo DaLu contemplated for a moment. "You are implying that he did not go find Commander Jin himself because he

was afraid that Commander Jin would recognize him?”

Wang Dong: “What do you say?”

Before Guo DaLu had a chance to reply, they heard Commander Jin’s deep voice bellow, “Who is that hiding sneakingly inside the house whispering away? Hurry out now!”

Wang Dong cast another glance over at Guo DaLu before finally pushing open the door slowly and sauntering out. Since Guo DaLu was not willing to move, then he would have to be the one who did.

Commander Jin was glaring at him. “What were you hiding in there whispering about?” he snapped.

In an indifferent tone, Wang Dong replied, “I do not need to hide, and you are not able to control what I whisper about.”

“Who are you?” Commander Jin demanded.

Wang Dong: “I am the master of this place. I can sit wherever it pleases me, and I will say whatever I feel like saying.” He gave a little grin before adding nonchalantly, “When a person is in his own home, even if he feels like ripping off his pants and farting, no one is allowed to have any say in it.” Normally his words were not so harsh, but now, he was purposely trying to take Commander Jin’s arrogance down a few notches.

Instead, though, Commander Jin smiled at him. Eyeing Wang Dong up and down a few times, he chuckled, “This person really does seem like someone who would be surnamed Wang.”

Wang Dong: “I do not seem like someone surnamed Wang. I am surnamed Wang.”

Commander Jin: "It would appear that you must be Wang Laoda's [recall, Laoda means 'biggest brother'] son."

Wang Dong: "Wang Laoda?"

Commander Jin: "Wang Laoda is referring to Wang QianShi, who is also your dad."

This time, it was Wang Dong who was taken aback. Wang QianShi really was his father. Of course, he knew his own father's name but not many other people did. Most people only knew Mister Wang's formal name, Wang YiQi. A person who knew the name Wang QianShi must undoubtedly be Wang QianShi's old friend. Wang Dong's manner immediately transformed and became much more polite. Probing, he asked, "Do you, sir, know my father?"

Commander Jin did not answer him and instead, with large strides, marched down the corridor. The door to Guo DaLu's room was open. He strode in boldly and seated himself in a chair directly in front of Guo DaLu. Putting on a forced smile, Guo DaLu greeted, "How are you?"

Commander Jin: "Hmph. Still doing fine. At the very least, I have not yet been maddened to death by someone."

Guo DaLu coughed drily a few times. "You came here to find me?"

Commander Jin: "Why would I want to find you?"

Guo DaLu paused in surprise. "Then, what is Commander doing here?"

Commander Jin: "Am I not allowed to come here?"

Guo DaLu: "Allowed. Of course you are allowed."

Commander Jin's tone was chilly. "Let me tell you this: when I was coming to this place, you were not even born yet." This person's entire stomach seemed to be filled with gunpowder that was ready to explode.

Guo DaLu was not afraid of him; it was just that he was feeling some guilt in his heart. No matter what, Commander Jin's ploy last time really was worthy of admiration, and his lesson had not been the least bit wrong. Unable to think of any way to deal with him now, Guo DaLu could only try to slip away. However, Commander Jin's eyes truly were very sharp. His foot had just started to budge before Commander Jin ordered, "Halt! "

And so, Guo DaLu could only smile apologetically. "Since you did not come to find me, why would you want me to stay?"

Commander Jin: "I have a question I want to ask you."

With a sigh, Guo DaLu gave in and said, "Alright. Ask away."

With a sigh, Guo DaLu gave in and said, "Alright. Ask away."

Commander Jin: "What will all of you be eating tonight?"
This question was completely unforeseen.

Guo DaLu could not hold back a giggle as he answered, "I just caught a whiff of the aroma of simmering pork. It will probably be something like bamboo shoots stewed with pork."

Commander Jin: "Good! Hurry and serve up the meal. I am hungry."

Astonished, Guo DaLu could only gawk. Now, even he was starting to become unclear about who was actually the master of this place.

Commander Jin barked again, "I told you to serve up the meal. Why are you standing there and staring off like an idiot?"

Guo DaLu threw a glance over at Wang Dong, but Wang Dong appeared as if he had not seen anything nor heard anything. Guo DaLu could only groan and mutter, "It's about time to serve up dinner. I am so very hungry also."

Dinner was being brought out onto the table. As expected, there was stewed pork with bamboo shoots. Commander Jin did not bother with courtesies and plopped his buttocks down at the head of the table. Wang Dong and Guo DaLu had no choice but to sit along the side of the table and accompany him. Commander Jin picked up his chopsticks, then suddenly inquired, "What about the other people? Why are they not here eating dinner?"

Guo DaLu: "There are two who are sick. They can only have porridge."

Commander Jin: "And what about the other one who is not sick?" It seemed he was very aware of the whole situation in this place.

Fumbling to find an excuse, Guo DaLu answered with a bitter smile, "I think he is in the kitchen." Yan Qi really was in the kitchen. He had not been willing to come out because he was too filthy and did not want to see other people. Since he had already stated this outright, Guo DaLu could only listen and obey because, if he had asked any further questions, Yan Qi would have glowered at him. The instant Yan Qi directed a glower at him, Guo DaLu would grow weak.

Commander Jin: "He is not a cook. Why is he hiding inside the kitchen?"

Sighing, Guo DaLu relented, "Alright, I will go get him." But the instant he stood up to go, Yan Qi shuffled into the room with his head hung low, as if he had been eavesdropping outside of the door the whole time.

Commander Jin looked him up and down a couple of times. "Sit." Surprisingly, with his head still lowered, Yan Qi really did take a seat. This guy seemed to have changed to become a lot more obedient today. "Good. Eat now," Commander Jin ordered them. Wolfing everything down like a tornado sweeping away scattered clouds, he emptied the table of the food in a very short while. Guo DaLu and the others practically had very few chances to reach forward with their own chopsticks.

Only when the plates had been cleared so that the bottoms were facing up did Commander Jin set down his chopsticks. A pair of forceful-looking eyes surveyed them, from Wang Dong to Guo DaLu and then from Guo DaLu over to Yan Qi. "Whose idea was it to scheme against me?"

His head still hanging, Yan Qi confessed, "Me."

Commander Jin: "Hmph. I knew it had to be you."

Yan Qi's head lowered even further.

Shifting his gaze over to Guo DaLu, Commander Jin said, "You were able to catch five rounds of my Pellets in Rapid Succession. The type of technique you used is extremely rare in jianghu."

Guo DaLu was unable to contain his grin. "It is passable."

"Who taught you that technique?" Commander Jin demanded.

"Me," Wang Dong spoke up.

Commander Jin: "I knew it had to be you."

Wang Dong could not help asking curiously, "How did you know?"

Commander Jin: "I not only know that he was taught by you, I also know who you were taught by."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

The expression on Commander Jin's face grew cold all of a sudden as he interrogated, "When your father taught you this skill, what else did he tell you?"

Wang Dong: "Nothing."

Commander Jin: "How could it be nothing?"

Wang Dong: "Because he [original term laorenjia; literally means 'old man or woman' but is a respectful way to refer to an elder] was not the one who taught me."

"You are lying," Commander Jin snapped.

Wang Dong's expression also hardened, and he stated coldly, "You will hear me speak all sorts of words, but you will never hear me speak a lie."

Commander Jin fixed his eyes on him. After a long time, he finally asked, "If your father did not teach you, then who did?"

Wang Dong: "I do not know who it was either."

Commander Jin: "How could you not know?"

Wang Dong: "I do not know means precisely that I do not know."

Commander Jin began gazing intently at him again. Another long while passed, and then, he rose abruptly to his feet. "You come with me outside," he commanded. In long strides, he marched out to the courtyard. Wang Dong followed slowly behind him. This person, too, seemed to be a little abnormal today.

Guo DaLu exhaled a sigh and murmured, "I now know what this commander came here to do."

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "I defeated his Pellets in Rapid Succession but he is not willing to admit defeat in his heart. Therefore, he came to seek out the person who taught me in order to challenge him to a contest." As his lips spoke, he had already gotten to his feet.

Yan Qi: "What do you want to do?"

Guo DaLu: "The wound on Wang Laoda's leg is not completely better yet. How can I just watch as he..."

Yan Qi interrupted in a cold voice, "It would be best if you stayed seated."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "Could you not tell that he came here to find Wang Dong, not you?"

"But Wang Dong's leg..." Guo DaLu protested.

"The legs are not used to catch Pellets in Rapid Succession."

The night was clear and bright.

Commander Jin watched as Wang Dong walked over towards him. He gave a sudden frown. "Your leg?....."

"I rarely use my legs to catch projectile weapons," Wang Dong answered without emotion. "I still have my hands."

"Good!" Commander Jin extended out his hand, and immediately, someone handed him his golden bow and leather pouch. With one swift motion, he had taken up the bow. Then, in that same instant, the entire sky was filled with shimmering gold light.

Then, in that same instant, the entire sky was filled with shimmering gold light.

No one had seen how he had launched his attack. Guo DaLu inhaled a sharp breath of cold air as he gasped, "How is it that his assault this time is so much faster than last time?"

"Maybe he did not want to buy a coffin for you," Yan Qi replied in an indifferent tone.

Guo DaLu: "But if he was not willing to use a lethal attack on me, why is he using one on Wang Dong? Could there be some sort of enmity between them?"

Even Yan Qi was not able to answer this question. Although he had perceived that there must be a peculiar purpose behind Commander Jin's visit, he still was not able to deduce what that purpose was.

In that same moment when Guo DaLu was worrying about Wang Dong, the golden lights in the night sky suddenly all disappeared. Wang Dong was still standing there alive and well, and two nets in his hands were filled with gold pellets. Nobody was able to see the technique he used; in fact, no one had been able to see when he had actually made his move.

Heaving yet another sigh, Guo DaLu mumbled, "It turns out his technique is also much better than mine."

Yan Qi: "This skill is certainly not something that can be mastered in one day of practice. Why would you think you could learn it all in one day? Did you really believe that you are a genius?"

Guo DaLu: "No matter, I have now learned and understood the key principles behind this skill."

Yan Qi argued, "That is only because the shifu [teacher, mentor] taught you well."

With a wide grin, Guo DaLu countered, "Of course the shifu is good, but the student is not bad either. Otherwise, he would have climbed into a coffin a long time ago."

Yan Qi stared at him and gave an unexpected sigh. "If you get rid of your bad habit of BSing, I will...."

"You will what?" Guo DaLu jumped in. "Will you tell me that secret of yours?"

Yan Qi suddenly grew quiet.

Even after this whole exchange of more than ten sentences, Commander Jin still stood in the courtyard. Wang Dong, too, was standing. The two stood there, you look at me and I look at you. After what seemed like half a day had passed, Commander Jin suddenly hurled his golden bow to the ground, strode back inside, and sat himself down forcefully in a chair.

Yan Qi and Guo DaLu had already been sitting there, and now, they stared at him. Another long moment passed until

Commander Jin yelled unexpectedly, "Where is the wine? Could it be that all of you never drink?"

Chuckling, Guo DaLu answered, "Occasionally we will have some to drink, just that we do not do it frequently. Everyday, at most, we will drink four or five times, and we will not drink too much. Each time, the limit will be seven or eight jin [1 jin (catty) = 0.5 kg]."

Wine jugs had been brought onto the table. Early in the morning that day, as usual, someone had brought wine up to them.

They had not drank any yet because they were not really a bunch of drunkards. Until they fully understood what Commander Jin's purpose there was, none of them were willing to get drunk. However, Commander Jin had already started drinking first. When he drank, he really did somewhat have the air of a commander. Each backwards toss of his head would down another large bowl of wine.

And since he was drinking, of course Guo DaLu was not willing to fall behind. From the way he consumed his wine, it would seem that sooner or later people would also be calling him commander.

Commander Jin watched him as he guzzled down seven, eight bowls in a single breath, and suddenly laughed, "It appears that you really can drink seven or eight jin of wine at one time."

Guo DaLu cast a glare at him from the corner of his eye. "Did you think I was giving you BS?"

Commander Jin: "You never have appeared to be an honest person."

Guo DaLu: "I may not appear to be an honest person, but I actually am one."

Commander Jin: "What about your friends?"

Guo DaLu: "They are even more honest than I am."

Commander Jin: "You have never heard them tell a lie before?"

Guo DaLu: "Never."

Commander Jin stared at him for a long time, and then all of a sudden, he turned his attention to Wang Dong. "That technique of yours really was not taught to you by your dad?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Commander Jin: "Who taught it to you?"

Wang Dong: "I have already told you; I do not know either."

Commander Jin: "How could you not know?"

Wang Dong: "He never told me."

Commander Jin: "You should have at least seen what he looked like."

Wang Dong. "No, because when he taught me, it would always be at night, and he would also cover his face."

Something flashed across Commander Jin's eyes and he pressed, "What you are saying is, a mysterious person with an unknown identity came to find you every night...."

Wang Dong: "Not 'find' me. Every night, he would wait for me in the forest by the graveyard."

Commander Jin: "Even if the wind was gusting or there was rainstorm, he would still wait?"

Wang Dong: "Besides the few days of New Year's Celebration, even if it was so cold that it could freeze the tears in your eyes, he would still be waiting there for me."

Commander Jin: "He did not know you nor did you know him, yet he would wait everyday for you for the sole purpose of teaching you his martial art, and furthermore, he did not ask for any sort of repayment. Is that correct?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Commander Jin laughed. "Do you honestly believe that such good things occur in the world?"

Wang Dong: "If someone else had told this to me, perhaps I would not believe it either, but in fact, the world really does have things like that. I have no choice but to believe it."

Commander Jin fixed his eyes on him for a long while. "Did you ever follow him? Did you try to find out where he lived?"

Wang Dong: "I tried, but I never succeeded."

Commander Jin: "If he came everyday, he must not have lived very far away."

Wang Dong: "Correct."

Commander Jin: "Are there any other households in the vicinity?"

Wang Dong: "None. The only household on this mountain is my family."

Commander Jin: "Why would your family live here?"

Wang Dong: "Because xian fu [respectful way to refer to your father who has passed away] enjoyed the peace and quiet."

Commander Jin: "So if there are no other people living on this mountain, does that mean that person crawled out from a coffin?"

Wang Dong: "Perhaps he lived somewhere off of the mountain."

Commander Jin: "Did you ever go to look?"

Wang Dong: "Of course I did."

Commander Jin: "But you were never able to find someone who seemed to possess such high martial art? Not many people live at the foot of this mountain. If there really was such a martial master, you should at least have been able to find hints of his whereabouts, yes?"

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Commander Jin: "What do you say? Since he taught you martial arts every night, he would have to have slept during the day. In such a small city, a person who spent everyday sleeping during the daytime would, naturally, not be able to avoid attracting the attention of other people, yes?"

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Commander Jin: "If that is the case, then why could you not find him?"

Wang Dong: "Perhaps he was not living in the city."

Commander Jin: "If he wasn't living on the mountain or in the city, where could he have stayed?"

Wang Dong: "A true martial arts expert is able to sleep in any place."

Commander Jin: "Even if he could sleep in caves, what about eating? No matter how great a martial arts master, he would not be able to not eat."

Wang Dong: "He could go buy food in the city."

Commander Jin: "A person who ate out every day, yet no one knew where he actually lived – would that not attract even more attention?"

Wang Dong glared back at him. He stared for a long moment before finally speaking coldly, "Do you know how many questions in total you have asked since you stepped through the front door?"

"Are you complaining that I am asking too much?"
Commander Jin asked.

Wang Dong replied, "I only find it odd that you insist on asking all these questions that have no relation to you whatsoever."

Commander Jin suddenly let out a laugh, and the expression on his face seemed to grow mysterious. In a single breath, he downed another three bowls of wine before saying unhurriedly, "Do you want to know who that masked person is?"

"Of course I do," Wang Dong answered.

Commander Jin: "Then why have you never asked?"

Wang Dong: "Because even if I asked, no one would be able to provide an answer."

Commander Jin nodded his head slowly. "That is true. There are very few people in this world who would know who he is."

Wang Dong: "Apart from himself, nobody knows, not a single person."

Commander Jin: "There is one."

Wang Dong: "Who?"

Commander Jin: "Me! "

As this one phrase was spoken, even Yan Qi was taken aback. Wang Dong stood stunned for quite a while. "Do you know how long ago this all occurred?"

Commander Jin: "No."

Wang Dong: "Yet you know who he is?"

Commander Jin: "Correct."

Wang Dong: "You never saw him and, in fact, do not even know when this all took place, yet you know who he is?"

Commander Jin: "Correct."

Wang Dong: "Do you really believe something like that would happen in this world?"

Commander Jin: "Even if I do not want to, I still have to believe."

Wang Dong: "And on what basis can you be so certain?"

Commander Jin did not answer this question. Instead, he drank another three bowls of wine first and then asked

slowly, "Do you know how many pellets are launched in one round of my Pellets in Rapid Succession?"

Wang Dong: "Twenty-one."

Commander Jin: "And in those twenty-one, do you know how many are fast? How many are slow? How many will change their rotations? How many are prepared to collide with other ones?"

Wang Dong: "I do not know."

Commander Jin: "If you do not even know these points, how could you catch my Pellets in Rapid Succession?"

Wang Dong paused in surprise.

"I became famous due to my Pellets in Rapid Succession and to date, it has been thirty years already. There are not many people in jianghu who are even able to evade my attack, but yet you are able to catch them easily." Commander Jin heaved a sigh and continued, "And not only are you able to catch them, even the person you taught is able to also."

That is basically regarding my Pellets in Rapid Succession as if they were a child's play things. Do you not find this the least bit strange?"

Wang Dong was silent for another long moment. "Perhaps that is because I used the correct method," he suggested.

Commander Jin suddenly smacked his palm loudly down on the table. "That is right. What you are using is not only the most correct method but also the most ingenious technique. This technique is not only able to defeat my Pellets in Rapid Succession, it can also be called the bane of all projectile weapons."

Wang Dong could only listen because even he himself did not know that this skill was so profound.

Looking carefully at him, Commander Jin inquired, "Do you know how many people in the world know this technique?"

Wang Dong shook his head in response.

Commander Jin: "Only one." Breathing a long sigh, he told him, "I have been searching for this person for more than ten years."

Wang Dong: "You... why are you looking for him?"

Commander Jin: "Because of all the fights in my lifetime, the time I lost most terribly was at his hands."

Wang Dong: "You want revenge?"

Commander Jin: "It is not completely for revenge."

Wang Dong: "Then what is it for?"

Commander Jin: "Since my Pellets in Rapid Succession can be defeated, that must mean it has a weakness, but I have contemplated this for several decades and still have not been able to figure out what that crucial factor is."

Wang Dong realized, "And since he was able to defeat your Pellets in Rapid Succession, he must also know what the weakness is."

Commander Jin: "Correct."

Wang Dong: "You think the masked person is him?"

Commander Jin stated confidently, "It is definitely him. It cannot be any other person. The technique that you used to catch my pellets is nearly completely identical to his."

An eager, hopeful look suddenly flooded Wang Dong's eyes.

However, Guo DaLu was even more impatient than him as he jumped in, "You have been talking on and on. Just who is this person you are referring to?"

With his eyes fixed intently on Wang Dong, Commander Jin spoke each word clearly. "This person is Wang QianShi, your father."

Even at the time when Cui MingFu had reached out his hands from the grave and grabbed his legs, Wang Dong's expression had not been as astonished as it was now.

But Guo DaLu was even more astonished and blurted, "You're saying that masked man was his father?"

Commander Jin: "Correct."

Guo DaLu wanted to laugh but was not able to. Instead, he exhaled a long breath and said, "Do you honestly believe such bizarre things can happen?"

Commander Jin: "This cannot really be considered bizarre."

Guo DaLu: "It still cannot be considered bizarre? What logic is there?"

Commander Jin's voice was calm as he answered, "At first, I was not able to figure it out, but once I saw that he lived in a place like this, I thought of one point. Then, after I saw your group of friends here, I thought of a second point."

"Why don't you first tell us about the first point?" Guo DaLu urged.

Commander Jin: "In his youth, Wang QianShi had another name. He was also called Wang FuLei [fu means 'to bring in

submission'; lei is 'thunder']. Its meaning was to say that he could even catch the thunder and lightning that Heaven sent striking downwards.”

He drank another cup before carrying on, “This name may have been cocky, but by the time he was twenty-three years old, it was already accepted in the martial world that he was the number one master of catching projectile weapons in the entire world. Even if he was a little arrogant, other people could not say anything.”

Everyone was listening. Even Guo DaLu did not interrupt.

Commander Jin: “It was only when he got older and his haughtiness was brought into check that he changed his name to Wang QianShi. By then, he very rarely moved about in jianghu anymore. Another two years passed, then he suddenly disappeared.”

At this point, Guo DaLu could not hold himself back and cut in, “It must be because he had grown weary of the struggles and killing in jianghu, so he decided to retire into the forest. This sort of thing has happened often since the ancient times, and there is nothing strange about it.”

Commander Jin shook his head. “That is not the main reason.”

Guo DaLu: “Oh?”

Commander Jin: “The main reason is because he had become enemies with a very powerful person, and he knew that he was not a match for this person. Hence, he buried his identity and went into hiding in this secluded place.”

Wang Dong suddenly spoke up, “Who is this enemy of his?”

Commander Jin: "It is because he did not want you to know who this enemy is that he did not come outright to teach you kungfu."

Wang Dong: "Why?"

Commander Jin: "Because if you knew about his past, sooner or later, you would also hear how he had made this enemy. As a youth filled with vigour and spirit, if you had known who this enemy was, then naturally, it would have been unpreventable that you would seek him out for revenge." He let out a sigh. "But this enemy was truly too formidable. Not only would you certainly not have been a match for him, I am afraid nobody within jianghu would have been able to withstand fifty stances from him."

There was not a trace of expression on Wang Dong's face. "I only want to know who this person is."

Commander Jin: "Even if you know now, it will be of no use."

Wang Dong: "Why?"

Commander Jin: "Because even if he had been unequalled in the world, there are some things that he was not able to defeat."

WangDong: "What are those?"

Commander Jin: "Aging, sickness, and death! "

Wang Dong's face shifted suddenly. "He has already died from illness?"

Exhaling a long breath, Commander Jin responded, "Through all the ages, which hero has been able to escape these things?"

Wang Dong started to ask anxiously, "But who is..."

"The person is already dead," Commander Jin interrupted, "and his name has also followed him and been buried into the ground. Why, then, should you keep asking?" He did not allow Wang Dong to open his mouth as he quickly added, "Ever since he came to this place, Wang FuLei was considered dead. As a result, he never again mentioned martial arts, not even in front of his own son."

"This is just the first point," Guo DaLu piped up.

Commander Jin: "Seeing what sort of people and friends all of you are, I can imagine that Wang Dong was a very mischievous child when he was young."

Although Guo DaLu did not say anything, the expression on his face was inadvertently admitting to Commander Jin's words for Wang Dong.

Commander Jin: "A mischievous child can cause trouble at any time. Wang QianShi worried that his son would eventually take a beating, and so, he could not help wanting to teach him some martial arts that could be used for self-defense." With a smile, he carried on, "But trying to get a child to stay at home nicely and learn martial arts is even more difficult than taming a wild horse.

Therefore, Wang QianShi came up with this method that could both conceal his identity and arouse Wang Dong's interest in learning martial arts - children are always particularly attracted to matters shrouded in mystery."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "It is not just children; adults are the same."

A shadowy dark night, a forest beside a graveyard, and a masked martial arts master... a situation filled with such

mystery that even old men would not be able to prevent their interest from being piqued.

Commander Jin: "You should now understand everything."

Guo DaLu: "There is still one thing I do not understand."

Commander Jin: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "How would you know what Uncle Wang [original Wang Laobo; laobo is also a polite form of address for an older man] had been thinking?"

Commander Jin: "Because I, too, am a father." With a lengthy sigh, he explained, "Only those who are fathers can truly empathize with the love and painstaking effort that a father pours into his son."

Wang Dong suddenly stood and dashed outside. Did he want to find a place where there were no other people so that he could let himself weep bitterly?

Yan Qi's head had been lowered the whole time. Now, Guo DaLu lowered his head also. "Why is it that sons must wait until it is too late for remorse before they finally understand their father's love and pains?"

Commander Jin was staring at them. All of a sudden, he raised his wine cup and boomed loudly, "Do all of you never drink?"

Many strange and mysterious questions do exist in the world, but there are surely answers to them also, just as gold and springs of water can definitely be found in the ground, fairness and justice exist undoubtedly in the world, and warmth and friendship are certainly present on this earth.

Even if you cannot see them, hear them, or find them, it does not mean that they do not exist. So long as you believe, then one day, you will find them.

“Are there people in the world who never become drunk?”

The most correct answer to this question is, “Yes.” People who never consume alcohol will never become intoxicated. As long as you drink, you will get drunk. If you do not stop and continue the drinking, then you will definitely not be able to avoid getting drunk.

And so, Guo DaLu was drunk. Commander Jin’s head was wobbling back and forth nonstop. Guo DaLu suddenly felt that this Commander Jin did not seem at all like a commander. In fact, he suddenly felt that he, himself, was much more like a commander and moreover, the commander of commanders.

Commander Jin was staring at him also and suddenly chortled, “Why is your head wobbling nonstop?”

Guo DaLu burst out into laughter. “Look at this guy! It’s his head that is wobbling, yet he goes and says that the other person’s head is wobbling.”

Commander Jin: “Who is this ‘other person?’ ”

Guo DaLu: “ ‘Other person’ means me.”

Commander Jin: “So if it’s you, why is it also ‘other person?’ ”

Guo DaLu mulled over this for a moment and then gave an unexpected sigh. “Do you know what the biggest problem about you is?”

Pausing to think as well, Commander Jin guessed, "Is it that I drink too much?"

Guo DaLu: "It is not that you drink too much; it is that you ask too many questions, to the point that people cannot stand it."

Commander Jin howled in laughter. "Alright, I will not ask any more. I have said I won't ask, so that means precisely that I will not ask... Could I ask one last question?"

Guo DaLu: "Go ahead."

Commander Jin: "Do you know what the actual reason is for my visit here today?"

Guo DaLu pondered over the question, then guffawed, "Look at this guy. He does not even know himself what he came here to do and asks me instead. I am not a roundworm in his belly. How would I know?"

It seemed as if Commander Jin had not even heard any of what he said. His eyes were fixed on that empty bowl in his hand, as if he was going to break out into sobs at any moment.

After a long time, he said, "I practiced my Pellets in Rapid Succession at home for ten years and had believed that I could take on Wang FuLei, but it turns out that I cannot even defeat his son. I..... I....." He suddenly leapt up, as if he, too, wanted to tear outside, find a place without any other people, and have a good cry.

Guo DaLu: "Wait."

Glaring at him, Commander Jin snapped, "Wait for what? Wait to lose face yet another time?"

Guo DaLu pointed to the gold pellets inside a large soup bowl sitting on top of the table. "If you are going, you should take that stuff with you." The bowl had originally been filled with simmered pork. He was the one who had poured the gold pellets into it.

Commander Jin: "Why should I take them with me?"

Guo DaLu: "These things were yours to begin with."

Commander Jin: "Who said? Why don't you ask them and see if they are surnamed Jin or not?"

Surprised, Guo DaLu did not answer.

All of a sudden, Commander Jin broke out into loud laughter again. "Those things are neither simmered pork nor meatballs. You cannot eat them or bite into them. Whoever likes those is a b**stard."

Guo DaLu: "Are you not going to use Pellets in Rapid Succession anymore?"

Commander Jin: "Whoever uses Pellets in Rapid Succession is an even bigger b**tard." Staggering unsteadily amidst his own roars of laughter, he dashed out. As he reached the door, he suddenly turned around to ask, "Do you know why in the past, I was so fond of using gold to fire at people?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Commander Jin: "Because everybody likes gold. If you shoot out gold, everyone wants to catch it to have a look, so they will forget that they need to evade. Catching is harder to do than evading and plus, gold will dazzle the eyes, so whoever uses gold as a projectile weapon will always have a big advantage."

Guo DaLu: "Then why will you not use them now?"

Thinking over this for a minute, Commander Jin finally replied, "Because having an advantage is a disadvantage and having a disadvantage is an advantage."

"It appears that you are not really drunk," Guo DaLu giggled. "You are still speaking very clearly."

With a glower, Commander Jin retorted, "Of course I'm not drunk. Whoever says I'm drunk is the b**tard of b**tards."

Commander Jin had left at last. It was true that he was not completely drunk; he was merely eighty, ninety percent drunk.

But what about Guo DaLu? He was staring fixedly at the golden pellets inside the bowl and was lost in thought for a long while before giving a sigh and muttering, "Some things in this world are so strange. When you want it, you cannot even get one, but then when don't even think about it, a whole stack arrives. Is that annoying or not?"

End of Chapter 33

Chapter 34 - The Ghost Gentleman

What if you lived in a secluded place, and what if someone knocked on your door in the middle of the night and requested politely, "I am tired and thirsty, and I missed my opportunities for lodging. I am hoping I could stay here for the night, and I kindly ask for a bit of water to drink."? Well then, as long as you were a person, you would certainly respond with, "Please come in."

Guo DaLu was a person. He was already normally a very forthright and hospitable person, and after he drank wine, he was even more forthright and hospitable. Right now, he had just finished drinking, and the amount he drank was not trivial.

Not long after Commander Jin left, he heard someone knocking on the door, and he rushed out to open it. The person who had knocked on the door said politely to him, "I am tired and thirsty, and I missed my opportunities for lodging. I am hoping I could stay here for the night, and I kindly ask for a bit of water to drink."

Guo DaLu, of course, should have replied, "Please come in," but these words unexpectedly would not come out of his mouth. When he saw this person, he suddenly felt as if something was jammed in his throat and not a single word would come out.

The person who knocked on the door was a black-clothed person. He was covered in black clothing, black pants, and black boots. Even his face was veiled with a black cloth so that only a pair of shimmering, deep black eyes was exposed. On his back, he carried a long sword in a black scabbard.

A sword more than five feet in length.

There were no lights in the doorway. As this person stood there, he seemed to be the incarnation of darkness itself. The instant he laid eyes on this individual, Guo DaLu's drunkenness seemed to clear up by several notches. He nearly could not restrain himself and almost blurted out, "NanGong Chou!"

In reality, he had never seen what NanGong Chou really looked like. The one he had seen was actually Mei Rujia. Although this man's attire and appearance, even the sword that he carried, was completely identical to Mei Rujia the time he had appeared with GunZi at Mai LaoGuang's barbecue meats shop, Guo DaLu was absolutely certain that this was not Mei Rujia. It was not because he was slightly taller than Mei Rujia or because he was a little thinner – what could it be? Even Guo DaLu himself did not really know.

When Mei Rujia was dressed in the black attire, he seemed to carry a fierce and menacing aura of death. This man did not have that. He neither had an aura of death or the aura of a human being. In fact, he did not seem to carry any sort of aura at all, as if he would not have any reaction even if you gave him a solid kick.

But Guo DaLu was willing to guarantee that, regardless of who it was, no one would be willing to even touch one of this man's fingers. The pupils of his eyes were very black and very bright, not all that different from any other ordinary person who practiced martial arts, yet for some reason, he only needed to take one glance at you and your entire body would seem to grow uncomfortable.

Right then, he was looking at Guo DaLu.

Guo DaLu's whole body was feeling uncomfortable, like awakening on the second day from a drunken stupor. His palms were clammy and his head was pounding so hard that he wished he could snatch up a sabre and chop it off.

The black-clothed man's eyes were still on him. It was obvious that he was waiting for Guo DaLu's response. However, Guo DaLu seemed to have forgotten to answer him. The black-clothed man did not say a word. Turning around abruptly, he began slowly walking away. The way he walked was also very normal except that the pace he was moving at was particularly slow.

With every step, he would first take a look in front of him before he would set his foot down, as if he was afraid that his next step would be on thin air and take him tumbling into a ditch filled with water or as if he was worried that he might kill an ant on the ground. At the way he was going, he would still not be off the mountain by the following afternoon.

Guo DaLu could not help himself as he spoke up unexpectedly, "Wait a minute."

The black-clothed man did not even turn his head. "No need to wait."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Black-clothed man: "Since it is inconvenient here, then I will not force it." After he finished these couple of sentences, he walked forward another two steps.

With a loud laugh, Guo DaLu said, "Who said it would be inconvenient? Within an eight hundred li radius, there is no other place that is as welcoming to guests as this one is. Please hurry and come in."

The black-clothed man was still hesitant. It was only after quite a lengthy moment that he finally turned his head around. Guo DaLu had to wait for another long while before he walked back to the door. "You are really inviting me inside?" He spoke extremely slowly, but he used very few words. Something that would require ten words for other people to say, he would only need at most six or seven words.

Guo DaLu: "Yes, honestly. Please come in."

Black-clothed man: "You will not regret it?"

Smiling, Guo DaLu answered, "Why would I regret it? You need not even mention one night; even if you stayed for three or five months, we would still welcome you just the same." His generous tendencies were starting to flare-up again.

Black-clothed man: "Thank you." He finally stepped into the courtyard, his eyes fixated only on the path before him and not looking over at anything else. Yan Qi and Wang Dong were watching him from the window and their expressions, too, showed shock. As the black-clothed man reached the corridor, he halted.

"Please go in first and have a cup of wine to drink," Guo DaLu invited with a pleasant smile.

"No."

Guo DaLu: "You never drink?"

Black-clothed man: "At times I will."

Guo DaLu: "And when are the times that you will?"

Black-clothed man: "After I have killed someone."

Stunned, Guo DaLu paused a moment before muttering, "If that is the case, it's best if you don't drink then." But then right after, as he thought about it, he found this hilarious. Mr. Guo would actually tell someone not to drink. This was a first.

The black-clothed man stood motionless at the start of that corridor. "There are guest rooms in the back. Since you will not be drinking wine, then please head over there," Guo DaLu told him.

"That will not be necessary."

Guo DaLu paused again. "Not necessary? What is not necessary?"

Black-clothed man: "It is not necessary to go to the guest room."

Guo DaLu: "Don't tell me that you want to sleep right here."

Black-clothed man: "Yes." As if he could not be bothered to speak to Guo DaLu anymore, he slowly closed his eyes and leaned himself against a column at the head of the corridor.

Guo DaLu could not help asking again, "If you are going to sleep here, are you not going to at least lie down?"

Black-clothed man: "Not necessary."

Guo DaLu: "Not necessary to lie down?"

Black-clothed man: "Yes."

Guo DaLu was speechless. The look on his face was as if he had seen a talking horse.

"Horses do not talk."

“But only a horse would stand up to sleep.”

“He is a horse?”

“No.”

“Who do you think he is?”

“NanGong Chou! ”

Yan Qi nodded. This time, he was finally agreeing with what Guo DaLu was saying.

The black-clothed man stood resting against the column, and he actually appeared to be really asleep. He himself looked like pillar – straight, cold, hard, responseless, emotionless.

With a sigh, Guo DaLu remarked, “If this person is not NanGong Chou, then there is no one else in the world who could be NanGong Chou.”

“Regardless of whether he is a horse or NanGong Chou, he has nothing to do with us in the least bit,” Wang Dong spoke up.

“He does,” Guo DaLu contradicted.

Wang Dong: “What would he have to do with us?”

Guo DaLu: “For someone like NanGong Chou, if he did not have a purpose, why would he come here?”

Wang Dong: “Why couldn’t he come here?”

Guo DaLu: “What would he come here for?”

Wang Dong: "No matter what sort of person he is, he still needs to find a place to sleep at night."

Guo DaLu: "Do you really believe he came here just to sleep?"

Wang Dong: "He is sleeping right now."

Guo DaLu: "If he is going to sleep that way, he could sleep anywhere. Why would he deliberately come here just to sleep?"

Wang Dong: "Regardless of what his purpose is, nevertheless he is still sleeping now, and so..."

Guo DaLu: "And so what?"

Wang Dong: "And so we should all go to sleep too." This was his conclusion. And so, he went off to go sleep. When Wang Dong said he was going to bed, it did not matter what else you wanted him to do as it would not get done.

However, Guo DaLu still stood by the window staring. "Why are you not going to bed yet?" Yan Qi asked him.

Guo DaLu answered, "I want to see if he really is sleeping and how long he can sleep like that."

Yan Qi was gnawing on his lip as he protested, "But this is my room. I want to sleep."

"Then go have your sleep. I won't be noisy and disturb you," Guo DaLu told him.

Yan Qi: "You can't."

Guo DaLu: "Why can't I?"

Yan Qi: "I cannot sleep when there is someone else in my room."

Guo DaLu chuckled, "If you get married and have a wife in the future, will you tell her to go sleep in a separate room?"

Yan Qi's cheeks seemed to redden slightly. Glowering, he snapped, "How do you know for sure that I am going to get married and have a wife?"

Guo DaLu replied, "Because there only two types of people in the world who won't take a wife."

"Which two?" Yan Qi asked curiously.

With a wide grin, Guo DaLu said, "One type is monks. The other type is those half-male-but-not-female people. In any case, you would not fall within one of those types."

Yan Qi was getting somewhat irritated and retorted, "Even if I must marry and take a wife, I would definitely not marry someone who was a stinky man like you." He had been a little annoyed before, but after he said this sentence, his face flushed an even deeper red color.

Suddenly, Guo DaLu pulled Yan Qi close to himself. "Look. What is that over there on the wall?" he whispered.

"Look. What is that over there on the wall?" he whispered.

Just when Yan Qi was ready to fling him off, he noticed a head peeking up over the top of the wall. The night was very dark. He was not able to clearly see this person's face, only a pair of bright, clear eyes that was looking every way. Fortunately, they had not lit any lamps, and therefore this person had not seen them. After surveying all four directions, the head suddenly withdrew back down.

Smirking quietly, Guo DaLu gloated, "See, my guess was correct. That person not only has malicious intentions, there is also more than just him alone."

Yan Qi: "You believe that he came here first so that they could have someone acting from the inside?"

Guo DaLu: "It must be."

Although the black-clothed man was still standing there unmoving, Yan Qi could not help staring at him as if mesmerized. Lack of action often can be a very frightening type of action. Even if Yan Qi really had wanted to sleep, by now, he had completely forgotten about it. An unknown period of time passed when he suddenly heard Guo DaLu muttering, "Weird. Really weird."

Yan Qi: "What is weird?"

Guo DaLu: "How come your body is not the least bit smelly?"

Only then did Yan Qi notice that he was standing very close to Guo DaLu, practically resting in his embrace. It was fortunate there were no lights in the room so the color of his complexion or the expression on his face could not be seen. Taking two steps back immediately, he nibbled on his own lip and snapped, "Am I allowed to not smell?"

Guo DaLu replied, "No."

"Why?" Yan Qi could not stop himself from asking.

Guo DaLu: "Because I have never seen you bathe or change your clothes. You should stink horribly."

Yan Qi: "Bull****t!"

Guo DaLu: "Bull****t stinks even more."

Yan Qi glared fiercely at him, as if he wanted to box his ears, but luckily for him, right at that moment, someone swept nimbly over the top of the wall like a wisp of smoke and landed inside the house. Obviously, this person was not really like smoke but he was indeed very light.

After soaring three zhang in that single leap, he touched down on the ground and surprisingly, did not make even the slightest bit of noise. His body was not only very light, it was also unusually thin and slight, virtually like the build of a child. However, on his face, he had a long beard that almost seemed to have grown together with his loose and unkempt hair that covered half of his face and showed only a crafty, fox-like pair of eyes.

Those eyes swept quickly over everywhere, then came to rest on the black-clothed man leaning against the column. The black-clothed man still had not stirred or opened his eyes.

All of a sudden, the person gave a wave of his hand and then immediately, three other people flew in from outside the wall. As would be expected, the physiques of these three people were bigger, but their lightness kung fu was not weak.

They were dressed in dark clothing suitable for slipping through the night and in their hands, they carried weapons. One used judge's brushes, another used a curved sword [弯刀], the third used a chain dart[链镖], while the thin, withered old man carried a pair of steel rings. All four were razor sharp unorthodox weapons that were extremely difficult to master. Anyone who had the ability to use them would not have weak martial arts skills.

But the black-clothed man was still motionless as he stood in that place, not showing any bit of reaction. The

expressions on these four people's faces were very tense as their eyes fixed unblinking upon him. One step at a time, they pressed toward him. It was apparent that they were ready to strike out with a deathly blow at any time and take his life in an instant.

Guo DaLu threw a look at Yan Qi, as if to say, "So they are not together." Yan Qi gave a quick nod of his head. The two of them made no move. They both had the same plan in their minds: to see how these four weapon-carrying midnight robbers would contend with the mysterious black-clothed man.

Who could have guessed that at this moment, the front door would unexpectedly open? Guo DaLu very clearly remembered that he had bolted up the door, but now, it had somehow noiselessly opened again. A man dressed in a long robe of dark green, one hand lightly waving a folding fan, leisurely stepped inside. His garments were very magnificent and the expression he carried on his face was cool and suave. He looked like a playboy who frequented brothels.

When Guo DaLu got a clear look of his face, though, he could not help getting a scare. It did not look like a face that belonged to a human at all. Even the demon masks inside Tibetan lamaseries were not as dreadful as this face. That was because this truly was a living, breathing face, and furthermore, it showed an expression on it – a sort of expression which, after one glance at it, would cause someone to awaken in the middle of the night in terror. Had Guo DaLu not seen it for himself, he would never have believed that such a face could be found on a human body.

Those four people carrying the unorthodox weapons had not yet detected that someone had entered into the house. The

footsteps of this man in the green robe were so light that it appeared as if he was not even treading on the ground.

Drifting over until he was behind the person with the judge's brush, he reached out and lightly tapped him with the fan. Immediately, like a rabbit that had just been struck by an arrow, the person jumped up and, with a flip in midair, dropped down beside the gaunt old man. Only now did they all notice the man in the green robe, and their faces instantly were flooded with fright.

Another glance passed between Guo DaLu and Yan Qi: "So these people are not together either."

These people seemed to be miming a soundless play, but it was all very mysterious and exciting. The man dressed in green was still gently waving the fan in his hand, appearing very cool and composed.

On the other hand, the four people who used the unorthodox weapons were extremely tense as they gripped tightly onto the weapons in their hands. The man in green unexpectedly raised his fan and pointed it first at them, then out the front door. Clearly, this meant he was telling them to leave.

The four people with the weapons exchanged a glance among themselves. Then, the old man clenched his teeth together and shook his head. Using the steel rings, he pointed first at the house, then at themselves. The meaning behind this was evident: "This territory belongs to us. We are not leaving."

The man in green gave an unexpected smile. No one would be able to look at a smile like this one. If someone saw a smile like this one, regardless of who it was, the hairs on his body would stand on end.

The feet of the four men with unorthodox weapons shifted so that they were standing together now. Light glinted off their brows. It was apparent that their foreheads were covered in a cold sweat.

The man in green's fan was pointing again, this time at the weapons in their hands, as if to say, "All of you, attack together."

The man in green's fan was pointing again, this time at the weapons in their hands, as if to say, "All of you, attack together."

The four looked at one another again, appearing to get ready to strike, but at that moment, the man in green suddenly appeared right in front of them. The fan in his hand lightly tapped the head of the person with the chain dart. It did not appear to be a hard tap, but, like a pile of mud, that person collapsed limply to the ground. A perfectly fine human head had been split open, and in the dim colors of the night, the bloody gore that came splattering out looked almost like a falling blossom.

While this person crumpled to the floor, the curved sword was already slicing towards the man in green's chest. The sword movements were nimble, smooth, fierce, and rapid.

But the man in green was even quicker. As he stretched out his hand, a "crack" sound was heard, followed immediately by another "crack." The curved sword fell to the ground with a "ding." And then, its owner's two hands had already snapped off, dangling only by a thin layer of skin still attaching them to their wrists. He had originally been standing, but as he looked down at his own hands, he abruptly fainted.

This had all happened in the blink of an eye. Terrified, the faces of the two remaining people had drained of all color, and their legs were shaking incessantly. For the most part, the old man was still able to remain calm. Bowing at the waist to the man in green, he pointed out the door with his steel rings. Anyone would have been able to tell that he was admitting defeat and was preparing to leave.

The man in green smiled again and nodded. At once, the two people picked up the two corpses on the ground and hurried away with large strides. They had just passed through the doorway when the man in green's outline seemed to blur, and then all of a sudden, he, too, was on the the other side of the door.

Guo DaLu did not see what happened outside the door. All he heard were two cries of anguish, and after that, several objects came flying in through the doorway, landing on the ground. They were a pair of judge's brushes and a pair of steel rings. However, the judge's brushes were broken into four pieces and the steel rings were warped so much that they no longer looked like rings.

With a sharp inhale of cold air, Guo DaLu looked over at Yan Qi. A hint of fear could be seen in Yan Qi's eyes. This man in green's martial art was strong, so strong that it carried an air of evilness. The most frightful part was that the manner in which he killed a person was similar to how other people would go slice up vegetables. Anyone who saw him commit murder would not be able to stop themselves from breaking out into a cold sweat.

However, the black-clothed man had not seen anything because he still had not stirred or opened his eyes. So many things had happened in the courtyard. People had died right in front of him, yet he did not show even the slightest reaction. It was as though even if everyone in the entire

world died right before him, he still would not have any reaction.

By now, the man in the green robe had walked casually back in through the door, all the while gently waving his fan and looking suave and at ease. It would be a wonder if someone could tell from looking at him that he had just murdered four people in one breath. Intentionally or unintentionally, he glanced briefly over at Guo DaLu and Yan Qi's window, but he still headed straight towards the black-clothed man.

In front of the corridor, there were a few stone steps. As he reached the second step, he halted and fixed his eyes on the black-clothed man.

Guo DaLu suddenly noticed that, at some point in time, the black-clothed man had opened his eyes and was looking back at him. The two of them stood there, staring at one another. The whole scene should have been rather humorous, but Guo DaLu did not feel that it was the least bit funny. All he felt were his palms growing cold – even his palms were breaking out in a cold sweat.

Another long while passed and then the man in green spoke up unexpectedly, “Just now, ‘Evil Bird’ Kang Tong came here with his brothers.” This was the first time he had opened his mouth to speak. It turns out that, not only did he carry himself with a very poised and elegant bearing, his speaking voice was also very pleasing to the ear. So long as you did not look at his face and only listened to him speak or only saw his graceful manner, he really would appear to be a perfect gentleman.

Black-clothed man: “Hmph.”

Man in green: “I was afraid they would disturb your sweet dreams, so I sent them away.”

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Man in green: "Could it be that you had already known they would come and so you waited here first for their arrival?"

Black-clothed man: "They are not worthy."

Man in green: "That is true. Those people truly are not worthy enough for you to even bother making a move. Who is it, then, that you are waiting for?"

Black-clothed man: "Ghost Gentleman."

The man in green smiled as he said, "I am grateful that you would think so highly of me. It is truly my great honour."

So this man was actually called Ghost Gentleman. Guo DaLu felt that there could not have been a more suitable name for him. But who was this black-clothed man? Was he NanGong Chou? Why would he wait here for Ghost Gentleman? Ghost Gentleman spoke again. "Since you are waiting for me, could it be that also know my purpose in coming here?"

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Ghost Gentleman: "We had met before, and we had always been polite to one another."

Black-clothed man: "It was you who was polite."

Ghost Gentleman smiled, "True. I was certainly very cordial to you, but you once sought me out to give me trouble."

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Ghost Gentleman: "This time, I hope that we will cordially meet up here and then cordially go our separate ways."

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Ghost Gentleman: "I only wish to ask the master of this place a few questions and then I will leave."

Black-clothed man: "No."

Ghost Gentleman: "Only a couple questions?"

Black-clothed man: "No! "

Surprisingly, Ghost Gentleman was still very civil as he smiled lightly and asked, "Why not? Are you a friend of the master here?"

Black-clothed man: "No."

Ghost Gentleman laughed, "Of course not. You are the same as me. We have never had friends."

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Ghost Gentleman: "Since you are not a friend, why must you try to involve yourself in other people's business?"

Black-clothed man: "I am already involved."

Something flashed across Ghost Gentleman's eyes. "Could it be that you have the same idea as me?"

Black-clothed man: "Hmph."

Ghost Gentleman: "It is uncertain whether Cui MingFu's money is even here. There is no need to break the peace."

Black-clothed man: "Get out! "

With another smile, Ghost Gentleman replied, "I will not leave."

“If you will not leave, then you will die,” the black-clothed man stated.

Ghost Gentleman: “Who will live and who will die is still unclear. Why would you want to strike?” It appeared that he was still not the least bit angry. All along, he seemed to bear everything without making a sound, yielding in every which way in order to accommodate. Anyone who was watching right then would not have been able to determine when he would strike and what that would look like.

However, the two people who were standing and watching by the window, Guo DaLu and Yan Qi, suddenly said simultaneously, “Watch; this person is going to make a move!” They had only said the third word in that sentence when Ghost Gentleman attacked.

They had only said the third word in that sentence when Ghost Gentleman attacked.

In that same instant, the black-clothed man lifted his two hands and gripped onto the sword hilt by his shoulder. Both of his arms were raised up, leaving the entire front side of his body open like a door, like a completely unguarded city waiting for the enemy forces to march straight in.

Ghost Gentleman’s fan had originally been closed and stabbing towards the black-clothed man’s “Xuan Ji” acupoint in a judge’s brush style of attack, but all of a sudden, the fan opened up rapidly. Carried by the momentum of the unfolding motion, the edge of the fan sliced upwards from the lower abdomen and straight towards his throat.

At first glance, there did not seem to be anything particularly special or exquisite about this variation in attack. In reality, though, the instant the fan unfurled, the direction and style of the strike had transformed so it was as

if he had switched to an entirely different type of weapon. The assault had gone suddenly from stabbing to slicing and the weapon had changed from using a point to an edge to attack. The ingenuity and unexpectedness of this rapid change would truly be unimaginable for the opponent.

The black-clothed man's back was against the column. Where he stood was a deathtrap, a place that gave no room for retreat. In addition, his hands were raised high, completely exposing himself. Any person who even only slightly understood martial arts would not have chosen such a place or position to face an enemy.

His sword was six feet in length. Under these circumstances, there was no way that it could be drawn. No other person would have been able to pull it out.

The black-clothed man could.

If someone chooses to fight in such an unfavourable territory and position and if he is not an utter fool, then he must have his own unique methods.

As Ghost Gentleman's fan slashed toward him, the black-clothed man abruptly spun his body around so that he was now facing the column, as if he was going to embrace it tightly. Although he was able to narrowly evade the last attack, he had now offered up his entire backside to his enemy. This method that he used was stupid beyond words.

Even Ghost Gentleman was taken aback by this. In his lifetime, he had been in at least two, three hundred fights against other opponents, of which there were all sorts of people: some were very skilled while others were substandard. This was the first time, though, that he had seen someone as foolish as this person.

However, in that split second, the black-clothed man gave a sudden powerful push on the column with his hand. Simultaneously, his legs kicked forward to also shove against the column, his abdomen contracted in, and his buttocks thrust out toward the back. Like an arrow, his body shot backwards, looking as if it had been broken in half as it folded over at the waist until his hands and legs came together.

At the same time, there was a bright glare of sword light. A six-foot long sword of cold steel had been drawn out of its scabbard. This method of unsheathing a sword was not just extremely unusual but also extremely devious. As Ghost Gentleman turned around in pursuit, he discovered the tip of that cold blade was already pointed directly at him. The black-clothed man's entire body was now behind the sword, leaving absolutely no vulnerable openings. The stupidest method had suddenly become the best method.

Ghost Gentleman realized with a start that he did not have the slightest opportunity to move in for an attack. He could only retreat. In a flash, he had withdrawn to behind the column. The column was circular and because the black-clothed man's sword was too long, it was not possible for him to wrap it around to strike.

Therefore, so long as Ghost Gentleman stayed close against the column and circled around it, the black-clothed man's sword would not be able to touch him. He could then wait for a second opportunity to attack. This was precisely a plan that sought victory amidst defeat and survival amidst death, and it truly was not a bad plan at all.

Ghost Gentleman pressed himself against the column, waiting for the black-clothed man to come around from the front. The black-clothed man, though, was still on the other

side of the column, and there was no hint of any movement. Could he, too, be waiting for an opportunity?

Ghost Gentleman exhaled a breath as he relaxed. He was not afraid of waiting, nor was he worried about wasting time. In any event, he had first placed himself into an impregnable position. Should the black-clothed man decide to attack, he would have to make a large circle, while Ghost Gentleman himself would only need to avoid him by staying against the column and stepping around in a small circle.

The difference in the amount of energy that each of them needed to expend was at least three or four times. In that way, it would not be long before the black-clothed man's strength was exhausted, and then, his opportunity would come. He had calculated everything out very thoroughly, and so, he was very much at ease.

He seemed to hear a "du" sound coming from the back of the column, like the sound of a woodpecker pecking a tree. He did not pay any heed to it, though.

But in that instant, he suddenly felt a coolness on his back. By the time he realized that something was not right, he was already feeling something icy cold piercing into his back, and then he saw that object exiting out the front of his chest.

The point of a sword, glinting with a dark light.

Drop after drop of fresh blood dripped off the point of that sword.

If you saw the tip of a sword suddenly protrude out from your chest, what would you be feeling? I am afraid very few people would actually know from experience what this feels like.

Ghost Gentleman looked down at that short section of sword, an expression of great surprise on his face, as if he had unexpectedly seen a very peculiar, very fascinating occurrence. As he gaped stupidly at it, his face twisted and became distorted from horror. He opened his mouth like he wanted to shout out, but before the cry had a chance to escape from his lips, his entire body suddenly grew cold as ice and stiffened.

Completely stiffened.

From a distance, it appeared as if he was staring at that sword, deep in thought. Blood was still dripping nonstop down from the tip. It was dripping very slowly, getting slower and slower...

His body was held in that same original pose – an indescribably disturbing and terrible pose.

Yan Qi had turned his head away, unable to keep watching. Although Guo DaLu's eyes were opened wide, in reality, he was not really seeing anything. That scene from a moment ago had left him in a daze. He had very clearly seen the black-clothed man inhale deeply and assume a stance and then that sword had stabbed into the column.

He had also very clearly seen the sword point plunge into the column, then suddenly reemerge through Ghost Gentleman's chest. He was really having difficulty believing that what he had just seen was real – if you heard it, perhaps you would immediately believe, but yet, if you saw it with your own eyes, it would be very hard to believe.

What sort of sword was this? What sword art?

Guo DaLu sighed. By the time his eyes were able to see again, he discovered that the black-clothed man had already

pulled his sword back out. But Ghost Gentleman still remained on its tip. The black-clothed man was using the sword point to carry the corpse from his shoulder.

A man in black, whose countenance could not be seen, carrying a sword across one shoulder. The blade of the sword emitted a black light, and from its tip dangled a stiff and contorted man in green robes.....

The dim night was sombre; the courtyard was silent. Even if this was merely a painting, whoever saw this painting would be overcome with a bone-chilling horror.

Let alone, this was not a painting. Guo DaLu suddenly felt very chilled and wanted to find some clothing to throw over his shoulders. His only wish was that what had occurred tonight was just a nightmare.

And now, they had awakened from that nightmare. The black-clothed man had left, and there was no one in the courtyard. It was still the same courtyard as before, the same dim night. He mumbled to himself, "Right now, if anyone who comes here is able to imagine what had occurred here a moment ago, I would be in utter awe of him."

Wang Dong spoke up unexpectedly, "What happened here a moment ago?"

"You don't know?" Guo DaLu asked.

Wang Dong: "Nope."

Guo DaLu: "Could it be that nothing at all happened here just now?"

Wang Dong: "Nothing."

With a laugh, Guo DaLu agreed, "True. Things that are already in the past are really no different from things that have never occurred."

Wang Dong: "Correct answer."

Guo DaLu: "So really, it is better if you just do not think too much. The more you think, the more troubled you will feel."

Wang Dong: "Another correct answer."

Yan Qi jumped in suddenly, "This time I'm afraid that is not a correct answer."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

"Because whether you think or not, this matter is going to bring troubles all the same," Yan Qi told them.

Guo DaLu inquired, "What sort of troubles?"

Sighing, Yan Qi admitted, "I cannot tell right now, and I cannot think of it either. That's why I know that it will be a very great trouble."

They suddenly all sealed their lips simultaneously. It was because, at that moment, the black-clothed man had slowly sauntered back in again, crossed through the courtyard, walked up the stone steps, and stood before the column. The long sword on his back had been returned to its scabbard.

Unable to restrain himself, Guo DaLu blurted, "I will go ask him." Before anyone else could open their mouths, he had already leaped through the window and dashed over.

The black-clothed man was leaning against the column with his eyes closed, as if he was asleep again. Guo DaLu purposely started coughing loudly, so hard, in fact, that his

throat really did start to itch. Only then did the black-clothed man open his eyes. His stare was cold and so was his voice as he said, "It would seem that you should hurry and find a doctor."

Forcing a smile onto his face, Guo DaLu replied, "I do not need a doctor. I have my own medicine that can cure coughing."

Black-clothed man: "Oh."

Guo DaLu: "Regardless of whether I have a serious illness or just a little one, the instant I drink wine, I will be better."

Black-clothed man: "Oh."

Guo DaLu: "Are you wanting to down a couple of cups right now too?"

Black-clothed man: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Why not? Didn't you just... just kill someone?"

Black-clothed man: "Who said I killed someone?"

Guo DaLu paused in surprise. "You didn't?"

Black-clothed man: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Just now, you killed that..."

"That was not a person!" the black-clothed man cut him off.

Startled, Guo DaLu repeated, "Not a person? Then what is needed in order to be considered a person?"

Black-clothed man: "There are very few persons in the world."

With a grin, Guo DaLu asked, "What about me? Can I be considered a person?"

Black-clothed man: "You want me to kill you?"

His eyes glinting, Guo DaLu prodded, "If you do not kill me, how will you get all of Cui MingFu's loot?"

Black-clothed man: "There is no loot here. There is nothing here."

Guo DaLu: "You knew?"

Black-clothed man: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Then why did you come here?"

Black-clothed man: "Missed my opportunities for lodging. Came for a place to stay for the night."

Guo DaLu: "But you just killed a person-who-was-actually-not-a-person for that."

Black-clothed man: "It was not for that."

Guo DaLu: "You killed him for us?"

Black-clothed man: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Then for what?"

In a cold tone, the black-clothed man answered, "I need my sleep. When I sleep, I do not like being disturbed by others." He closed his eyes again and did not say another word.

Guo DaLu looked first at him, then at the sword behind his shoulder. He suddenly felt that he had been extremely lucky.

Sure enough, the next morning, the black-clothed man was nowhere to be seen. He did not take anything with him or leave anything behind – all he left was that one hole in the column.

Guo DaLu was gazing at that hole when, all of a sudden, he broke out into chuckles. “Do you know what I am thinking right now?”

Yan Qi shook his head.

“I am thinking that I am awfully lucky,” Guo DaLu told him.

“Lucky? Why?” Yan Qi asked curiously.

Guo DaLu explained, “Because the black-clothed man I encountered last time was not this one.”

In a low voice, Yan Qi countered, “But you still encountered him this time.”

Guo DaLu: “I was not out of luck this time either. It seems that not only does he not hold any bad intentions toward us, he actually seemed to have deliberately come here to help us out.”

Yan Qi: “He is your friend?” Guo DaLu: “No.”

Yan Qi: “Your son?”

Guo DaLu giggled, “If I had a son like him, it would already be a wonder if I did not go nuts.”

“You believe that he arrived here by accident and then, after he did us a favour, left without making a peep? He not only did not ask for any thanks from us but also refused to even drink any of our wine.” With a shake of his hand, Yan Qi said

with a cold laugh, “Do you really believe that this world has such good people and good things?”

Guo DaLu asked, “Are you trying to say that he must have some other motive?”

Yan Qi: “Yes.”

Guo DaLu: “What is his motive then?”

Yan Qi: “Don’t know.”

Guo DaLu: “It is because you don’t know; that is why you believe he will undoubtedly bring us lots of troubles, right?”

Yan Qi: “Yes.”

Guo DaLu: “When do you think those troubles will come?”

As his eyes gazed off into the distance, Yan Qi said slowly, “It is precisely because we do not know what sort of troubles they will be, otherwise there would be no need for us to worry.”

End of Chapter 34

Chapter 35 - The Mysterious NanGong Chou

There is nothing in this world that is truly “absolute.” The same situation looked at from different angles will often lead to different conclusions.

If a traveller who has lost his way on the desolate mountainside comes knocking on your door in the middle of the night asking for a place to stay, you need only to have the slightest bit of compassion in your heart and then you will “absolutely” take him in. If the one who comes is a man dressed in black whose face is hidden behind a cloth, whether or not you take him in is no longer certain now.

Even if you do, you surely would be wary of him and, to some extent, would guard against him. But if the person dressed in black is the same person who had helped you out the previous night, isn't the situation again completely different?

Different situations will naturally result in changes to the actions taken. Only principles do not change. There are some people who, no matter what they do or how they do it, have their own absolute principles.

What, then, were Guo DaLu and the others' principles?

They would very easily forget the hatreds from others, yet they would not forget the kindness shown by others. So long as you had been good to them before, then regardless of what the circumstance may be, they would surely find a way to repay you. And as long as it was something that they had promised to do, then no matter what the situation, they would find a way to do it.

Even if they needed to split open their heads, they would still do it. They would never find excuses to avoid their responsibility and absolutely would not be thick-skinned enough to deny their debt. And no matter what sort of things arose, they would never try to run away from them.

Midnight. Someone was knocking on the door again. The knocking sound was very rapid.

The first one to hear the knocking sound may have been Yan Qi or perhaps it was Wang Dong, but the first person who scrambled over to open the door was always Guo DaLu. The one who had arrived was again the mysterious black-clothed man from the previous night. Once again, he stood there like a ghostly spirit and asked, "I lost my way on this isolated mountain and missed my opportunities for lodging. May I stay here for the night?"

"Yes, of course," Guo DaLu answered with a smile. "You need not even mention one night; even if you stayed here for an entire year, there still would not be a problem."

"Really, there would be no problem?" the black-clothed man questioned.

Guo DaLu said, "Not the slightest bit of a problem. Whether or not you really did miss your lodging, we would still welcome you at any time."

Black-clothed man: "Although you may think that, I am afraid other people..."

Guo DaLu interjected, "The others feel the same. Since you have come here, then you are our guest."

Black-clothed man: "What sort of guest?"

Guo DaLu: "We only have one sort of guest here."

Black-clothed man: "But there can be several types of hosts."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Black-clothed man: "There is one type of host that will evict their guests at any time they please."

"There is no such host in this place," Guo DaLu replied with a grin. "Once you enter this door, unless you yourself choose to leave, no one here will tell you to go."

The black-clothed man unexpectedly exhaled a long sigh. "It would seem that I did not knock on the wrong door." With that, he slowly walked inside, crossed the courtyard, and stepped up to the corridor. The way in which he walked had not changed and his appearance was still the same.

But there was at least one thing that had changed – he had grown more talkative. In that short period of time, the number of words spoken from him was two or three times more than all that he had said in the previous night combined.

Though it was deep into the night, light was still shining in two or three rooms. It seemed that Lin TaiPing was still up reading. What about Yan Qi? No one ever knew what he did in his room because he always liked to make sure his doors and windows were shut tightly.

The black-clothed man glanced over at the light glowing in the windows, then inquired, "Your friends' rooms are over there?"

Nodding his head, Guo DaLu answered with a smile, "My room is the very last one. It's closest to where meals are eaten."

Besides still being brightly lit, the very last room's door was also thrown wide open. The black-clothed man sauntered over to it and stood in front the door. After quite a while had passed, he finally remarked, "Although you may not have stated it out loud, there is something that I am certain you know already."

Guo DaLu: "What is that?"

Black-clothed man: "No person is actually able to sleep while standing."

Guo DaLu guffawed, "Even sitting and sleeping at the same time is very difficult."

Through the open door, a large bed could be seen inside the room. The black-clothed man was looking at the bed. With a sudden sigh, he said, "But there is also another thing that I am sure you would not know either."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

In a slow tone, the black-clothed man said, "You would definitely not know how long it has actually been since I have had a nice night of peaceful and secure sleep in such a large bed."

Guo DaLu let out a chuckle. "I really don't know, but I do know something else."

Black-clothed man: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "I know that tonight, you will have a nice night of peaceful, secure slumber on this bed."

The black-clothed man turned his head back suddenly.
“Really?”

Guo DaLu: “Of course.”

Black-clothed man: “You will let me sleep until daybreak?”

Smiling, Guo DaLu promised, “Even if you sleep all the way until noon, it would still be no big deal. I guarantee that no one will disturb you.”

The black-clothed man stared at him, his eyes glinting. Suddenly, he cupped his fist in his hand and gave a deep bow. Without another word, he strode into the room and closed the door. And then, the lamp in the room was snuffed out.

The light had gone out for a long time before Guo DaLu slowly turned around and took a seat on the stone steps before the hallway in front of the door. It was not that Wealthy Manor did not have any other empty rooms or unoccupied bed, but yet he deliberately chose to sit there, as if he was prepared to stand vigil that night for the black-clothed man.

End of Chapter 35

Chapter 36 - The Purple-Dressed Girl

The night was cool, the stone steps even cooler. But he did not care because his heart was filled with warmth.

The sound of footsteps echoed lightly down the corridor as someone walked gently over towards him. He did not turn his head to look because he knew who it was. Of course, the one coming over was Yan Qi.

A long robe was draped over Yan Qi's shoulders, and it dragged on the ground as he walked. He sat down on the stone steps also.

Countless stars filled the sky. The Milky Way looked like a glowing silver ribbon and the stars, Altair [star of the Cowherd] and Vega [star of the Weaver Girl] resembled two pearls sewn onto it. Even though there were other stars in the sky that were brighter, none could be more beautiful than them. That was because they were not like other stars, cold and unfeeling.

It was because they were not gods: they, too, experienced the same love and hardships that mankind knows. Though their hardships were many and the distance between them great, their love would exist forever.

Yan Qi breathed out a faint sigh. "You ought to know by now, right?"

"What is it I ought to know?" Guo DaLu asked.

Yan Qi replied, "Trouble. Last night you still thought it would not happen, but it has arrived now."

Guo DaLu laughed, "Giving up my bed to a guest for one night cannot be considered a trouble."

Yan Qi: "Whether it is trouble or not will depend on what sort of person the guest is."

Guo DaLu: "What sort of person is he?"

Yan Qi: "A person who is in trouble and furthermore, that trouble is not trivial."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "Because he is in trouble, he came here to hide out."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "And because he needed to hide out here tonight, he came here last night and did a favour for us first, just like a renter who first puts down a deposit."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "You don't need to pretend to be dumb. In reality, you have understood this reasoning all along."

Guo DaLu: "What is it that I understand?"

Yan Qi: "You know that someone will definitely be coming here to find him so that's why you are standing guard here right now. You are prepared to fend off whatever it may be for him."

Guo DaLu was silent for a while before saying, "Last night, when someone came to give us trouble, who fended it off for us?"

Yan Qi: "He did."

Guo DaLu: "Then, even if it is true that someone is going to come here to give him trouble, why can we not deflect it

away for him?”

Yan Qi: “Well, that depends on what sort of trouble it is.”

Guo DaLu disagreed, “It does not matter what sort of trouble it is. Since we have already accepted his deposit, we have to rent the house out to him.”

It was Yan Qi’s turn to grow quiet for a period of time. At last, he asked slowly, “How do you think his martial art ability is relative to you?”

Guo DaLu: “He seems to be superior to me by a little bit.”

Yan Qi: “Right now in this place of ours, there are only two people who are able to fight. If he is does not have the ability to fend off this trouble, do you think we would actually be able to do it?”

Guo DaLu: “We should at least give it a try.” By ‘give it a try’, he meant that he was prepared to put his life on the line.

Yan Qi: “What if he is a bandit or a murderer? You would still fight for him?”

Guo DaLu: “Those are two completely different things.”

Yan Qi: “What do you mean two different things?”

Guo DaLu: “The reason why people are looking for him is one thing; the reason why I am helping him is another thing.”

Yan Qi: “What is your reason?”

Guo DaLu: “Because tonight he is my guest and because I have already promised him a night of peaceful and secure sleep.”

Yan Qi: "And you do not care about anything else?"

Guo DaLu: "One way or another, tonight, I am only concerning myself with this one matter."

Yan Qi scowled at him. Biting down on his lip, he spluttered, "You... what kind of person are you anyway?"

"I am just this kind of person," Guo DaLu replied. "You should have known that long ago." With a withering stare, Yan Qi gave a sudden stomp of his foot, stood up, and turned his head ready to leave. He took two steps, then stopped abruptly. Tugging off the long robe on his shoulders, he flung it over Guo DaLu. "If you are worried I will be cold, it would be best if you brought me a bottle of wine," Guo DaLu advised with a grin.

Nibbling on his lip, Yan Qi snapped, "You think I would be worried that you are cold? I'm only worried that it is not cold enough and you won't die."

The robe was large and wide. It was rather curious who it belonged to. Unusual things always seemed to emerge from Yan Qi's room. In the past, he would always disappear for a few days, but this habit seemed to have gradually changed of late.

However, Guo DaLu still seemed to sense that there was an air of mystery surrounding him, and he always appeared to keep a slight distance between himself and everyone else. Being such good friends that they all were, though, this sort of distance should not have existed anymore.

The robe was very old and very dirty with patches all over it, but it was not the least bit smelly. This, too, was something that Guo DaLu had always found to be odd. It seemed that Yan Qi never bathed, yet his room would always be tidy and

clean. Guo DaLu resolved to himself that tomorrow he must ask him, "What sort of person are you anyway?"

By now, the light in Yan Qi's room had been extinguished, but Guo DaLu knew for certain that he would not actually sleep. As he shifted the robe to cover his shoulders, warmth flooded his heart, for he knew that no matter how tough the words from Yan Qi's lips may be, so long as there was anything that affected him, Yan Qi would always be more concerned and anxious than anyone else.

The night was still. A breeze rustled the rosebay flowers by the corner of the wall, their flowery shadows dancing. Guo DaLu really did want to go find some wine to drink, but right at that moment, he suddenly heard the sound of a strange sort of music. The music was amazingly light and seemed to flit about. At first, it had appeared to be coming from the east but all of a sudden, it shifted over to the west. And then, it seemed as if the music was resonating from every direction.

"They have come. The ones looking for trouble have come after all."

Guo DaLu felt his entire body starting to burn up, and even his heart started beating two or three times faster than normal. What sort of person had come? Of course, he was not able to guess the answer to that, but he did know that these persons must be very formidable. Otherwise, why would the black-clothed man be so frightened that he needed to hide?

The more formidable these visitors were, the more exhilarating the situation was.

Guo DaLu's eyes were opened wide. The robe that had been draped on him had now fallen to the ground.

With a loud “bang”, the front door flew open.

With a loud “bang”, the front door flew open.

Two Kunlun slaves¹⁴, suddenly appeared in the doorway. Their hair and beards were curly, their noses hooked, and their upper bodies completely bare.

The only thing they wore were wide-bottom pants embroidered with gold, and from each of their left ears dangled a very large gold hoop. In their arms, they carried a roll of red felt, which they unfurled until it spread from the doorway all the way into the courtyard. Then, with a somersault in midair, the two men retreated out the door without so much as glancing over at Guo DaLu, as if there was not a single person in the courtyard.

Even though Guo DaLu was so excited that sweat had broken out onto his skin, he still managed to contain himself. This was because he knew that the real show was to follow. The arrival of these two Kunlun slaves may have been strange and mysterious, but they were merely minor characters, and it was certain that the main lead was yet to appear.

Sure enough, another two people immediately came in from outside the door: two non-Han [orig. man; literally means ‘barbarian’] girls adorned in bizarre fashions and with dark black hair plaited into seventy or eighty braids that swayed back and forth with the music. Each of them carried a large basket in their hand as their soft, rosy arms strewed colourful fresh flowers onto the red felt.

Both girls were very beautiful. The snowy-white calves of their legs were exposed beneath the hem of their short skirts, and anklets of golden bells on each of their legs rang

out chimes of “ding ding dong dong” in time with the music. Guo DaLu’s eyes grew even rounder. Unfortunately, they did not cast even a single glance in his direction. After they had finished scattering their flowers, they, too, did a flip in midair and withdrew back out the door.

“It seems that this whole situation is not only becoming more and more exciting but more and more interesting as well.” Any situation, no matter what it may be, involving beautiful woman would always be exciting and interesting. Plus, it seemed that there were more and more beauties arriving.

Four maidens, dressed like palace maids in long dresses that swept along the floor, with hair twisted high on their heads in a cloud-like bun, and carrying four palace lanterns in their hands, walked in daintily. All four had graceful figures and elegant bearings and were lovely as fairies.

They had just halted their footsteps when the two tall, long-legged Kunlun slaves marched back in carrying a large armchair [orig. hu chuang; ancient folding armchair] between them. A regal-looking woman dressed in purple was reclining in the chair, a bright silver pipe propped in her palm as she inhaled idly from it.

The light smoke dispersed out all around like a fog, and her face seemed to be lost in the cloud and mist. In one hand, she held a dragon-head walking staff and beside her chair, a young midget girl was gently hammering her legs with her fists to massage her.

Guo DaLu breathed out a sigh secretly. Although he was not able to see this purple-dressed noble woman’s face, after seeing the dragon-head staff and the young girl massaging her legs, anyone would have been able to deduce that she was not young of age. This was the one blemish in an

otherwise ideal scenario. Up until this point, everything in the unfolding of this situation had been very appealing. If the main character was also a beauty whose countenance was like a flower or the moon, would that not be utterly perfect?

Fortunately, Guo DaLu had always known how to comfort himself. "In any case, this old lady must be a very remarkable personage. Just based on the manner in which she entered, there are very few people of jianghu who could compare to her." Therefore, this situation was still very fascinating.

As for this old woman, who was she? How had this enmity between her and the black-clothed man come to be? How deep was the hatred? Would Guo DaLu really be able to fend her off? It seemed that Guo DaLu had not bothered to even contemplate any of these points.

Since he had taken everything onto his own shoulders already, even if he was not able to, he would still have to stop her. What good, then, would it serve to think about any of this? And so, he simply kept his patience and waited. If the other person was not going to open her mouth to speak, he would not either.

After a long time passed, the purple-dressed old woman's lips parted and blew out a puff of thick smoke. Like an arrow, the smoke went flying in Guo DaLu's direction. Such a very thick smoke. Even though Guo DaLu liked to drink, he had never smoked before. Tears nearly flowed from his eyes as he choked, and he almost could not stop himself from cursing out loud. But if a person was able to blow smoke out in such a straight line, it would be best for you if you were a little more polite to her.

Before the smoke had cleared, he heard a voice say, "Who are you? What are you doing sitting here in the middle of the night?" The voice was crisp and clear. It did not seem as if it should belong to an old lady, but neither was it pleasing to the ear, sounding fierce and unreasonable as it shouted out questions, like an officer interrogating a thief.

Guo DaLu heaved a sigh. With a wry smile, he returned, "It seems that this place is actually my home. It should not be against the law for a person to sit in his own home, right?" Before he had finished what he was saying, another breath of smoke came surging over into his face. The smoke was even thicker this time, and Guo DaLu could not hold back the coughing that overcame him. His face felt as if it was being pricked all over by needles.

"If I ask one question, you answer with one sentence," the person said. "It would be best if you kept the clever words to yourself, understand?"

Forcing a smile, Guo DaLu answered, "Apparently, even if I do not want to understand, I have no choice."

"Where is NanGong Chou?" the purple-dressed noble woman demanded. "Hurry up and tell him to roll himself out here now!" That black-clothed man really was NanGong Chou.

Sighing, Guo DaLu said, "My sincerest apologies. I cannot tell him to roll out."

Purple-dressed noble woman: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "One: because he is not a ball and will not roll. Two: because he is asleep and anyone who wants to wake him up must first do one thing."

Purple-dressed noble woman: "What is that?"

Guo DaLu: “Knock me down first.”

The purple-dressed noble woman gave a cold smirk. “That is easy.” She had not finished speaking these three words when, out of the fog-like smoke, the shadowy figure of a person soared into the air. There was a flash of cold light that stabbed straight at Guo DaLu’s throat.

This person’s assault had come so swiftly, but fortunately Guo DaLu’s reactions were not slow either. However, he had just managed to evade the first attack from the sword when the second one followed after it. One stance flowed after another, rapid and furious.

Only after Guo DaLu had dodged the fourth sword attack did he notice that his assailant was actually the young midget girl. Her height was less than three feet and the sword she used was at most only one foot, six or seven inches in length, but the furiousness and shrewdness of her swordplay could already be considered as first-class skills in jianghu.

It was a pity that her body really was just too small and her sword too short. In one motion, Guo DaLu suddenly snatched up the long robe and tossed it forward.

The robe was long and wide and was like a large dark cloud. For such a small person to avoid being enveloped by it would be an extremely difficult feat. The girl let out a little shriek and, with a dainty gasp, accused, “A big person bullying a little person. You’re shameless. Shameless!” After saying this, she withdrew back.

Smiling wryly, Guo DaLu acknowledged, “Having no shame is at least better than having no life.”

The purple-dressed woman gave a cold laugh. “You would dare to stick your nose in my business and yet, you still want

to keep your life?" Amid the sound of that laugh, the two curly-haired, bearded Kunlun slaves had already appeared in front of him, standing there like two iron towers.

Guo DaLu sighed again. "The small one is overly small and the big ones are overly big," he muttered under his breath. "What should I do now?" Without waiting for these two people to attack, his body tore forward and, like a fish, wriggled past them from underneath their ribs.

In one step, he had scampered up in front of the armchair. He grinned, "On the other hand, you are neither too big nor too small. Now, if you were not too old, you would happen to be a good match for me."

The purple-dressed noble woman laughed coolly, "You say I am too old?" By now, the smoke by her face had gradually dissipated, and Guo DaLu at last could see her face. He could not restrain himself from letting out a cry of astonishment, as if he had just seen a ghost. One step at a time, he backed away. He had never thought that what he saw would be such a face.

A pretty and youthful face. Even though it was made up with rouge and powder, trying as much as possible to appear like a grownup, its childlike air still could not be concealed, just like no matter how thick the make-up is applied, an old lady will never be able to hide her wrinkles behind it.

This "old woman" who had this grand and impressive air, who smoked, and who had someone massage her legs, was actually a sixteen, seventeen year old girl. Guo DaLu was utterly dumbfounded.

The purple-dressed girl rose slowly from the armchair. A pair of eyes that looked like copper bells were staring at him. Step after step, he retreated; step after step, she pressed in

on him, her hand still dragging the dragon-head staff behind her. This girl was obviously young and pretty. Why was it she insisted on putting forth the appearance of an old woman? From looking at her face, she was at most sixteen or seventeen years old. How could she possess such profound internal energy?

Even her subordinate, a little servant girl, already had such high swordsmanship, and those two Kunlun slaves naturally were characters that would not be easy to handle either. What was it about this girl that made these people submit to her? How did she manage to develop an enmity between herself and NanGong Chou, who had already made a name for himself over twenty years ago? And why would a person with NanGong Chou's reputation and swordsmanship be so dreadfully afraid of her?

Guo DaLu really could not figure any of this out, nor did he have the time to think about it right then. Though the purple-dressed girl's eyes were stunning, when they were glaring at you, they resembled those of a tiger ready to gobble down a person. In her chilly tone, she asked, "Am I old?"

Guo DaLu: "Not old... not old at all."

Purple-dressed girl: "Did you want to match up and be a couple with me?"

Guo DaLu: "No... no..." He really was not lying. No man could ever stomach being with such a girl.

Purple-dressed girl: "Would you like to keep your life?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Purple-dressed girl: "If you want your life, then hurry up and tell NanGong Chou to drag himself out here."

Guo DaLu: "Why do you want him to drag himself out here?"

Purple-dressed girl: "To take his life."

Guo DaLu: "Must it be tonight that you kill him?"

Purple-dressed girl: "Yes."

"Must it be tonight that you kill him?" Guo DaLu asked again.

Purple-dressed girl: "I had said that if I could not kill him before daybreak, I would spare his life."

Guo DaLu: "Your word must be kept but other people must keep their promises also."

Purple-dressed girl: "What did you promise?"

Guo DaLu: "I promised him that tonight, he would be able to set his mind at ease and sleep until daybreak. Therefore..."

Purple-dressed girl: "Therefore what?"

Guo DaLu: "Therefore, if you want to kill him, then you must kill me first."

Purple-dressed girl: "You are his friend?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Purple-dressed girl: "Do you know how many wicked deeds he has committed?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Purple-dressed girl: "But you are still willing to risk your life for him?"

Guo DaLu: "Correct."

The purple-dressed girl gave a cool smirk. "Do you believe that I do not dare to kill?"

Guo DaLu managed to force a smile as he responded, "You really do not look like you would kill anyone."

"I started killing when I was nine years old," she stated unemotionally. "Every month, I would take at least one person's life. Why don't you calculate how many there have been to date?"

With a sharp intake of cold air, Guo DaLu answered, "About seventy or eighty by now."

Purple-dressed girl: "So adding you into that count would make no difference."

Guo DaLu heaved a sigh. But before he could say anything, they heard an icy voice say, "If you want to kill him, you will have to kill me first."

It was not Yan Qi's voice. It was Lin TaiPing's.

The night colours seemed sombre. Lin TaiPing, his face white as paper, had walked over at some time.

"Who are you?" the purple-dressed girl demanded with a fierce glare.

Lin TaiPing's tone was chilly. "You do not need to know who I am. Since you have already killed seventy, eight people, adding me into that count would make no difference."

The purple dressed girl sneered, "Who would have thought that the number of people in this place who do not fear death is actually not a small one?"

Lin TaiPing: "True, it really is not a small number."

Purple-dressed girl: "If that is the case, then I will help you get what you wish." Her body spun around abruptly, and the dragon-head staff in her hand stabbed towards Lin TaiPing in the stance, "Splitting the Blossoms, Caressing the Willow."

She was using a sword art. Not only was it a sword art, it was the most graceful and nimble form of sword art. In those white and petite hands of hers, that long, heavy staff seemed to suddenly morph into something that did not even weigh four liang [1 liang = 50 grams].

Guo DaLu shouted, "Your injuries are not better yet. Let me!"

But though he wanted to rush in and fight, it was too late. Like a streak of lightning, the purple-dressed girl had already executed seven sword stances at Lin TaiPing, her swordplay light and rapid and containing within it limitless variations. Lin TaiPing was completely encircled by it.

It was evident that he was not yet fully recovered and appeared as if he did not have the strength to retaliate. Yet, even though the purple-dressed girl's sword moves were swift and tight as a silk cocoon, she was not able to even brush the corner of his garments.

Suddenly, the clear sound of a shrill cry could be heard, and then the nine foot long dragon-head staff was thrust straight up into the ground. The purple-dressed girl was now on top of the staff. Pivoting on it, she spun toward Lin TaiPing like a windmill. In this attack, she was using the staff as the backbone and her body as the weapon. This bizarre transformation in style of attack was far beyond human imagination.

Lin TaiPing's footsteps faltered as he retreated back nine steps. With another loud shriek, the purple-dressed girl soared into the air. The staff was still stabbed into the ground, but in her hand, there was now a short sword that gave off a bright glare.

The sword had originally been concealed within the staff, but now, the instant it was in her hand, it was as if sword and person had merged into one. Together, they propelled towards Lin TaiPing. This move was even more ingenious, more dangerous.

Guo DaLu had broken out into a cold sweat from anxiety. If he had been the one who encountered this move, his chances of escaping would have been slim.

However, it appeared as if Lin TaiPing was very familiar with every variation in her attacks. Her sword moved like an arcing rainbow across the sky, but just as it swept up in front of his face, Lin TaiPing suddenly spun his body, evaded the strike, and dashed forward to yank the dragon-head staff out of the ground.

The howls of the purple-dressed girl did not cease as she flipped in the air and reversed her sword to thrust it backward at him. Lin TaiPing did not even turn his head as he raised the staff. A "zheng" sound was heard. Sparks showered forth in all directions. And then, the short sword had been sheathed back into the staff.

The purple-dressed girl's body was seen flying into the sky, somersaulting four times before floating lightly back down to land in front of the armchair. She was staring fixedly at Lin TaiPing as if in a daze.

Guo DaLu, too, was looking on in amazement. Just a moment ago, when Lin TaiPing had wielded the staff, if there had

even been the slightest of error in its placement, the purple-dressed girl's sword would very likely have plunged into his chest.

Yet, he had calculated out the positioning so accurately that there was not even the tiniest error, as if he had sparred against this purple-dressed girl hundreds of times before. Before she executed any move, he already knew what she was going to do.

They all watched as, in a single motion, Lin TaiPing thrust the staff back into the ground, turned his head and left.

End of Chapter 36

Chapter 37 - The Imposter Shall Die

The purple-dressed girl unexpectedly called out loudly after him, "Wait! "

"Wait for what?" Lin TaiPing questioned in a cool tone.

The purple-dressed girl was gnawing on her own lip. "You... do you really plan on just leaving like this?" She seemed to have suddenly grown very distressed. Even her hands and legs were trembling.

Lin TaiPing hesitated for a moment before finally turning around slowly. "What do you want?"

Purple-dressed girl: "I..... I..... I only want to ask you one thing."

Lin TaiPing: "Ask."

Her hands were clenched together. "Are you..."

Lin TaiPing cut off her question abruptly. "Yes."

The purple-dressed girl stomped her foot. "Fine. Then let me ask you: that day, why did you run off?"

Lin TaiPing: "I felt like it."

Her fists balled up even tighter, and even her lips had grown pale as she asked in a quivering voice, "What is it about me that you think does not deserve you and you had to make me lose face like that? "

In a distant tone, Lin TaiPing replied, "It is I who does not deserve you, and the one who has lost face is also me, not you."

Purple-dressed girl: "Now that I have found you, what do you plan to do?"

Lin TaiPing: "I do not plan on doing anything."

Purple-dressed girl: "You still are not willing to go back?"

Lin TaiPing: "Unless you kill me and carry my corpse back, you should just give up on that idea."

Her eyes had grown red and her lips were bleeding because she had bit down so hard on them. "Fine," she spat hatefully. "You can set your mind at ease. I will not send someone here to force you to go back. But I swear, one day, you will be on your knees begging me.

One day..." Her speaking turned to sobs. She had completely forgotten about hunting down NanGong Chou. With another sudden stomp of her foot, she flipped into the air and swept over the wall. In the blink of an eye, the people who had come with her also disappeared. All they left behind was a ground littered with fragrant flowers and a roll of red felt.

It was deep into the night. The light was faint. In the darkness, the look on Lin TaiPing's face could not be seen. There are some subjects where it is inappropriate, and also unnecessary, to ask.

After a long time had elapsed, Lin TaiPing at last turned his head back and gave Guo DaLu a forced smile. "Thank you."

Guo DaLu: "It should be me who is thanking you. Why would you thank me?"

Lin TaiPing: "Because you did not ask who she is or how I knew her."

With a grin, Guo DaLu told him, "If you wanted to tell me, I would not need to ask. If you do not want to tell me, then why should I ask?"

Sighing, Lin TaiPing remarked, "Some things, it is just better not to say anything at all." He slowly turned around and walked back into his room.

As Guo DaLu stared after the gaunt-looking outline of his back, there was a great sense of shame in his heart. He had not asked only because he was already able to guess who that purple-dressed girl was. He knew much more than Lin TaiPing imagined.

In certain matters, it was him hiding things from Lin TaiPing and not the other way around – up until now, Lin TaiPing had still been kept in the dark about the time he and Yan Qi had met Lin TaiPing's mother. Although their intentions for this were good, in his heart, Guo DaLu had always felt uncomfortable it. He had never concealed anything from his friends before, no matter what the reason.

A breeze wafted by, blowing the remnants of the blossoms up from the ground. And then, he heard Yan Qi's voice. In a gentle tone, Yan Qi said, "You must know now who that girl in purple is."

Guo DaLu nodded. Of course he was able to guess that she was Lin TaiPing's betrothed. It was precisely because Lin TaiPing was unwilling to take such girl as his wife that he run off.

Yan Qi sighed, "Only now can I completely understand why Lin TaiPing chose to run away."

"Even I wouldn't be able stand such a girl, let alone Xiao Lin," Guo DaLu replied with a wry smile.

Yan Qi: "So there are girls out there that you cannot stand."

Guo DaLu: "Of course."

Yan Qi: "Isn't she very pretty, though?"

Guo DaLu: "What good is it that she is pretty? When a man looks at a girl, he does not just look at her face."

Yan Qi blinked. "Then how do men look at women?"

Guo DaLu: "He looks to see if she is gentle and kind, if she is virtuous and intelligent, and if she would understand how to be considerate to her husband. Otherwise, even if she is beautiful as a fairy, no one will like her."

Yan Qi stole a look at him out of the corner of his eye. "And you? What sort of girl do you like?"

"The type of girl I like is different from other men," Guo DaLu chuckled.

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "If there is a girl who truly understands me and cares for me, even if she is a little ugly and a little fiery, I would still love her just the same with all my heart and soul."

An enchanting smile filled Yan Qi's face. With his head lowered, he brushed past Guo DaLu and walked over to the flower bed in the corner. The dim light of the night suddenly seemed to have grown soft and gentle again. The peonies growing in the corner were blooming in brilliant color. Yan Qi gently caressed the dewdrops on the petals.

After quite some time passed, he finally turned his head and discovered that Guo DaLu had been gazing fixedly at him

the whole time. His brows furrowed slightly as he said, "I am not a girl. What is there to look at? Why are you always staring at me?"

Guo DaLu: "I... I was thinking that the way you are walking tonight seems a little different from normal."

Yan Qi: "What is different?"

Guo DaLu chuckled, "The way you are walking today seems particularly attractive to watch, more attractive even than a girl's way of walking."

Yan Qi's face seemed to turn a slight tinge of pink, but he deliberately pulled it into a scowl and said in a chilly tone, "It seems that you have changed a bit of late too."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "You seemed to have developed some sort of bizarre problem lately. You are always doing bizarre things and saying bizarre words. We really should find a doctor and bring him here to check you out." Guo DaLu was quiet for while. His eyes seemed to give off a melancholy and fearful look, like he really was a person who knew that he had developed a grave illness. Yan Qi, on the other hand, was giggling as he said charmingly, "But you do not need to be too worried. In reality, everyone, to some extent, has got problems."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Yan Qi: "Do you know who has the biggest problem?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope."

Yan Qi: "That Yu guniang [Miss Yu]."

Guo DaLu: "Who is Yu guniang?"

Yan Qi: "Yu guniang is referring to that girl who came here just now. Her surname is Yu, and her given name is LingLong."

Yan Qi: "Yu guniang is referring to that girl who came here just now. Her surname is Yu, and her given name is LingLong."

Guo DaLu: "Yu LingLong?"

Yan Qi: "Don't tell me you have never heard of her before."

Guo DaLu: "Never."

Shaking his head, Yan Qi sighed, "It seems you really are ignorant and uninformed and don't have the slightest bit of knowledge on anything."

"I could also tell that she has a serious problem," Guo DaLu protested, "but why should I have heard of her?"

"Because by the time she was nine years old, she was already famous within jianghu," Yan Qi replied.

Guo DaLu echoed, "Nine years old? Did you say nine years old?"

Yan Qi nodded. "She comes from a prominent family background and moreover, she is a female child prodigy. Supposedly, she had not even passed her second birthday before she started practicing martial arts. By the time she was five, she had already completely learned the skill, '49 Stances Returning Breeze, Dancing Willow Sword', a martial art where the most complicated variations are contained within the stances."

Guo DaLu: "She said that she had already killed by the time she was nine years old. Based on what you have said, it seems that her words are probably not untrue."

Yan Qi: "Not one bit untrue. Not only did she really kill someone when she nine, but furthermore, that person was actually a very well-known swordsman in jianghu."

Guo DaLu asked, "From that point in time on, she had to kill one person every month?"

Yan Qi: "That is true too."

Guo DaLu could not help bursting out into laughter. "How could there be so many people in the world who would allow themselves to be brought before her for her to kill?"

Yan Qi: "People did not bring them to her; she sought them out."

Guo DaLu: "Where would she go to find them?"

Yan Qi: "Everywhere. Once she heard that someone had did something that deserved to be punished by killing, she would immediately hurry there to seek that person out and settle the score."

Guo DaLu: "But could she really have succeeded every time?"

Yan Qi: "You saw for yourself just now how good or bad her martial art is. Plus, those two Kunlun slaves and two non-Han girls are also first-class fighters. Actually, even the martial arts of those four servant girls carrying the lanterns are not weak either. And hence, it is very rare that anyone is able to escape from her if she goes knocking on their door."

Guo DaLu: "Does no one keep her in check?"

“Her father died when she was very young,” Yan Qi explained. “Her mother is the nastiest woman that you could cross in jianghu, but she always gives in to whatever this precious daughter of hers wants.”

Therefore, even if people are capable enough that they are not scared of provoking the daughter, they still dare not provoke her mother.” Yan Qi gave a sigh before carrying on, “In addition, the people she killed deserved to die anyways, so not only did the older generation of jianghu not condemn her, they actually only commended her.”

Guo DaLu: “And that is why by the time she was thirteen, fourteen years old, she had already become the girl with the grandest air and the highest martial arts – the more people you kill, logically, the higher your martial art is. It is precisely for these reasons that, even when someone like NanGong Chou knew that she was coming to give him trouble, he could only hide and dared not show his face.”

Yan Qi: “Correct answer.”

Guo DaLu: “NanGong Chou had obviously already known about her relationship with Xiao Lin and hence, hid and refused to show his face.”

Yan Qi: “Correct answer.”

Guo DaLu: “But if NanGong Chou did not really deserve to die, she would not have come here to find him?”

Yan Qi: “Yes. She has never wrongly sought out anyone in the past.”

Guo DaLu heaved a long sigh and said with a bitter smile, “And so, the one who is wrong is not her, it’s me.”

“You were not wrong either.” In a gentle voice, Yan Qi added, “A kindness is always repaid. A promise is worth a thousand in gold [one’s word is always kept]. These have always been qualities of a true man. No one will blame you for what you did.”

Guo DaLu: “Only one person will.”

Yan Qi: “Who?”

Guo DaLu: “Myself.”

The sky would be bright soon. The long robe was still draped on Guo DaLu’s shoulders as he sat in that place by himself, staring at the milky-white morning fog rising slowly from the courtyard and listening to the faroff call of a rooster carried in on the dawn breeze.

And then, he heard the sound of a door opening. He did not turn his head. No expression could be seen on his face. The sound of very slow footsteps came up behind him and then stopped. Still, he did not turn around, but merely asked indifferently, “Your sleep was not bad?”

The black-clothed man stood behind him gazing intently at his neck. “In these last ten years, I have never slept so peacefully and comfortably.”

Guo DaLu: “Why is that?”

Black-clothed man: “Because there has never been someone like you to stand watch outside the door for me.”

With a little chuckle, Guo DaLu asked, “If there is no one to guard your door, you are not able to sleep?”

Black-clothed man: “Even if there is someone to guard my door, I still cannot sleep.”

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Black-clothed man: "Because I do not trust anyone."

Guo DaLu: "But yet, you seem to trust me."

The black-clothed man laughed unexpectedly, "It appears that you quite trust me also."

Guo DaLu: "Why do you say that?"

"Because aside from you, no one has ever dared let me stand behind them," the black-clothed man answered casually.

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

Black-clothed man: "I am not a noble gentleman. I have frequently killed people from behind their back."

Guo DaLu nodded his head slowly. "It is indeed much more convenient to kill someone from behind."

Black-clothed man: "Especially when they are nodding."

Guo DaLu: "When they are nodding?"

Black-clothed man: "On the back of every person's neck, there is one spot that is particularly good to bring a blade down onto. You only need to find this spot and then you will be able to lop off the head in one chop. Experienced executioners all know this point."

Nodding his head slowly again, Guo DaLu agreed, "Logical. Truly very logical."

The black-clothed man was quiet for another while before speaking in a low tone, "You did not sleep this whole time?"

Guo DaLu: "If I slept, would you have been able to sleep?"

The black-clothed man began laughing again. His laughter was short and piercing, like the sharpening of a blade. All of a sudden, he walked up in front of Guo DaLu. "Why are you letting me stand behind you?" Guo DaLu asked curiously.

"Because I do not want to be tempted by you," the black-clothed man answered.

Guo DaLu: "Tempted?"

Black-clothed man: "When I stand behind you and see you nod your head, my hands start to itch."

Guo DaLu: "When your hands start to itch, you must kill?"

Black-clothed man: "There has only ever been one time where that was an exception."

Guo DaLu: "Which time was that?"

Black-clothed man: "Just a moment ago." After he finished speaking this, without even turning his head back, he strode forward to leave.

Guo DaLu stared after him until he reached the door. "Wait," he called out.

Black-clothed man: "What else do you have to say? Anything that should have been spoken seems to have already been said."

Guo DaLu: "I only have one thing that I want to ask you."

Black-clothed man: "Ask."

Rising to his feet slowly, Guo DaLu articulated each word very clearly: "Are you NanGong Chou?" The black-clothed man did not reply, nor did he turn his head back, but Guo DaLu could tell that the muscles on his shoulders had suddenly tensed.

The breeze seemed to have halted abruptly, and the courtyard suddenly grew deathly still and silent. After a long time had passed, Guo DaLu said, "If you are not willing to speak, nodding will work fine. You can relax, too, because I have never had any experience in chopping off someone's head, and I will not kill someone from behind their back either."

There was still no wind, no sound.

Another lengthy moment went by before the black-clothed man said in a deliberate tone, "In these ten years, you are the seventh person to ask me that question."

Guo DaLu: "And are the previous six people all dead?"

Black-clothed man: "Yes."

Guo DaLu: "The reason that they died was because they asked this question?"

Black-clothed man: "Anyone who asks that question, no matter who it is, must pay a price. Therefore, it is best if you reconsider before asking."

Guo DaLu gave a sigh. "I really want to reconsider but unfortunately, I have already asked the question."

All of a sudden, the black-clothed man whipped back around and stared at him with a gaze like daggers. "What if I am NanGong Chou?" he barked.

His voice nonchalant, Guo DaLu replied, "Last night, I had already promised you that so long as you entered through this doorway, you would be my guest. No one would harm you or kick you out."

Black-clothed man: "What about now?"

Guo DaLu: "Those words are just as valid now. It is just that I would like to keep you here to stay for a little while longer."

Black-clothed man: "And I would stay until when?"

In that indifferent tone, Guo DaLu answered, "Until you have thought things through and are aware that the things you did in the past are wrong. When you feel ashamed and remorseful, then you may leave."

The black-clothed man's pupils seemed to be contracting. "What if I am not willing?" he challenged in a sharp tone.

"That's simple too," Guo DaLu laughed. Walking over unhurriedly to the black-clothed man, he said with a light smile, "Is there a spot on the back of my neck where it is particularly easy to bring a blade down onto?"

Black-clothed man: "Every person has one."

Guo DaLu: "If you are able to find mine and chop off my head in one blow, then you can go."

The black-clothed man gave a cold smirk. "I do not need to try and find it."

Guo DaLu: "You had already found it just now?"

Black-clothed man: "Just now, I did not make a move at you because I was repaying your kindness of last night." His

body suddenly retracted and, like an arrow, was sliding backwards.

Guo DaLu, too, darted immediately after him.

The black-clothed man flew into the sky, and with a flip in the air, the sword was already out of its scabbard – a seven foot long sword, clear like the deep waters of autumn.

The black-clothed man flew into the sky, and with a flip in the air, the sword was already out of its scabbard – a seven foot long sword, clear like the deep waters of autumn.

Out of nowhere, a “qiang” sound was heard. Then, this long sword like the autumn waters suddenly had another scabbard on it. The scabbard had come from beneath Guo DaLu’s robe. As the black-clothed man slid backwards, he had also dashed right after him. When the sword had come out of its scabbard, he had also pulled out his own scabbard from beneath the robe and, thrusting it forward, sheathed it onto the sword.

The sword was seven feet in length; this scabbard was only three feet seven inches. However, the black-clothed man’s sword was still encased by it and could no longer be put to use. His body continued to withdraw back because he had no choice but to retreat – Guo DaLu was gripping tightly onto the scabbard with both hands and pressing forward forcefully.

If he did not let go of his long sword, then all he could do was allow himself to be shoved backwards. If he did release his hold, then it would be unavoidable that he would be struck in the chest by the hilt of his own sword. His body had been travelling backwards to begin with, and now, even if he wanted to change the direction his force was being applied and push out in front of him, it was already too late. And so,

he really had no control over his own actions. As Guo DaLu pressed forward one foot, he could only move back one foot.

All that could be heard was a “bang” as his body was shoved backwards and struck the wall. Guo DaLu’s hands were still firmly grasping the scabbard, pinning him against the wall. At this time, he was not able to continue retreating, or more importantly, let go of his long sword – the instant he let go, the hilt would smack solidly into his chest.

This situation was set-up so ingeniously that unless someone saw it with their own eyes, they would not even be able visualize it.

Grinning, Guo DaLu asked, “You probably never even conceived of this move before?”

Through grit teeth, the black-clothed man spat, “What kind of kung fu is that?”

“This really cannot be considered any sort of real kung fu,” Guo DaLu admitted with a laugh, “because, aside from using it to deal with you, this skill would be completely useless on other people.” As if he was afraid the black-clothed man still did not understand, he explained further, “That is because, besides you, no one else in the world would use this method to unsheathe their sword.”

The black-clothed man’s voice was icy. “You specifically invented this move just to deal with me?”

Guo DaLu: “Correct answer.”

Black-clothed man: You had intended on keeping me here all along?”

Guo DaLu: “Really, there is nothing bad about staying here. At the very least, you are able to have a peaceful sleep

every day.”

Black-clothed man: “Hmph! ”

Guo DaLu: “All you have to do is promise me that you will stay here and then I will immediately release my grip.”

Black-clothed man: “Hmph! ”

Guo DaLu: “What does ‘hmp’ mean?”

A cold sneer on his face, the black-clothed man retorted, “Even though I have no way of killing you right now, you are also powerless against me. The instant you loosen your hold, I will still be able to put you in a place of death.”

Guo DaLu: “Yes, that is not completely out of the question.”

Black-clothed man: “Therefore, you should give up on any ideas that you can intimidate me. Even if I am willing to agree to your terms, you must still let go first before we negotiate.”

Guo DaLu looked intently at him for a long time. With an unexpected little chuckle, he said, “Alright. I might as well trust you one more time. As long as you...” Before he could finish what he was going to say, he saw something suddenly bore out from the black-clothed man’s chest.

The short point of a sword.

The tip of the sword was dripping blood. As the black-clothed man stared down at the sword point, the expression in his eyes was exactly the same as the one that had been in Ghost Gentleman’s eyes before he died. Guo DaLu, too, was gazing at it as if in a daze. All that could be heard was a “ge ge” sound coming from the black-clothed man’s throat, like he wanted to speak but yet was not able to.

Guo DaLu let out a sudden loud shout, soared up into the air, and swept over the wall. Sure enough, that sword had first stabbed in through the wall's exterior before piercing through the black-clothed man's chest. The hilt was still stuck there on the outside of the wall.

But there was only the sword hilt. There was no person.

The wind was blowing again. The long grass growing on the mountain rippled like waves. But not even half a human shadow could be seen.

A strip of white silk was tied onto the hilt of the sword, dancing and undulating with the breeze.

Guo DaLu had wanted to go up and yank out the sword, but he suddenly noticed that written in ink that had soaked through fabric were seven characters:

"The imposter shall die.
- NanGong Chou"

The bloodstain on the sword tip had dried by now. The black-clothed man, however, still stood there with his head lowered, appearing as if he was deep in thought while gazing down at that sword point. The expression on his face was also identical to Ghost Gentleman's when he died.

Yan Qi, Wang Dong, and Lin TaiPing stood in the corridor, staring at the corpse from a distance.

His arrival had been sudden; his death even more surprising. The most shocking point, though, was that he, too, was not NanGong Chou.

Guo DaLu stood next to him, his eyes fixed on that sword point. He also seemed to be lost in contemplation. Yan Qi

walked quietly over to him and asked, "What are you thinking?"

Sighing, Guo DaLu answered, "I was thinking, if he is not NanGong Chou, why would he willingly be his scapegoat?"

Yan Qi: "What do you mean by scapegoat?"

Guo DaLu: "If he was not NanGong Chou, Yu LingLong would not have wanted to kill him, he would not have needed to take cover here, and now, he would not be dead here either."

Yan Qi: "Are you feeling bad for him?"

Guo DaLu: "A bit."

Yan Qi: "But I am only feeling sorry for NanGong Chou."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi: "It's not even known how many people he has killed or how many evil deeds he has committed under NanGong Chou's name and yet NanGong Chou may not even have any hint of all this. In reality, you should have said that NanGong Chou is his scapegoat, not the opposite."

After mulling over this for a while, Guo DaLu nodded. "But no matter what, he was still my guest and he still died inside our courtyard."

Yan Qi: "And as a result, you are still feeling bad for him?"

Guo DaLu: "There is still a little bit."

Yan Qi: "If you had really released your grip a moment ago, do you think he would be feeling bad for you right now?"

Guo DaLu: "If I had let go, do you really think he would have seized that chance and killed me?"

Yan Qi: "You think he wouldn't have?"

Guo DaLu: "Regardless of what you say, I still believe that human beings are human beings and will always have some sort of humanity in them. You may not be able to see it or touch it, but you absolutely must believe that it exists. Otherwise, what significance is there in being a person?"

Yan Qi's eyes were on him. With a sudden sigh, he remarked, "I actually also hope that your perspective is more correct than mine..."

Tilting his head, Guo DaLu gazed deeply into the cloudy sky. He was silent for a long while. "Now I only hope for one thing," he spoke up unexpectedly.

Yan Qi asked, "What are you hoping for?"

"I only hope that, one day, I can meet the real NanGong Chou and see what sort of person he really is..." His eyes seemed to shine as he mused, "I think, compared to any of the people we had previously seen, he must be much more mysterious and much more fearsome."

But did this person, NanGong Chou, really exist in the world? No one knew; no one had ever seen him.

End of Chapter 37

Chapter 38 - Where Has Spring Gone?

Nobody knew NanGong Chou's whereabouts, just like no one could know where spring would be going. But though spring may go, it will return at some point in time. NanGong Chou, however, was gone without any news of him.

Now, spring would be departing soon. The flowers in the courtyard were blooming even more colorfully, but alas, even the most beautiful flower cannot keep spring. The weather was gradually getting hotter. Although Wang Dong's injuries were fully healed, he had become even lazier.

He would lie all day in his bamboo chair, almost not even bothering to budge in the slightest bit. Except for that one day when they buried the black-clothed man...

That day had been close to Qing Ming Jie [see previous footnote [9]], but there was no soul-wrenching rain accompanying it. In fact, the weather was very nice. As they were returning from the gravesite, Wang Dong brought up the rear like he usually did.

Hong NiangZi had not come with them. She was nearly completely recovered from her injuries, yet she would still hole herself up in her room all day. Nowadays, it was not Wang Dong who was avoiding her but rather, it was her avoiding Wang Dong. A woman's heart is always unfathomable so this was not unusual at all.

What was unusual, though, was that Guo DaLu also seemed to be avoiding Yan Qi of late. While Yan Qi and Lin TaiPing walked up ahead, he strolled languidly at the back with Wang Dong. When they were halfway back, Wang Dong found himself a shady spot beneath a tree, sat down, gave a

big stretch, and let out a yawn. Guo DaLu, too, sat down after him, stretched, and let out two yawns. Wang Dong chuckled and, with a slight smile on his face, commented, "Lately, you seem to have become even lazier than me."

"Who ever stipulated that only you are allowed to be the laziest person?" Guo DaLu responded. "Can I not be a bit lazier than you?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because, right now, you should be the one most vigorous one out of all of us."

Guo DaLu: "Why is that?"

Wang Dong: "Do you still remember what Yan Qi said about you that day?"

Guo DaLu: "No. Why must I always remember what he says?" This guy was acting like he had just swallowed three tons of gunpowder and his belly was filled with explosives.

Wang Dong did not seem to mind. The smile was still on his face as he reminded, "He said that, out of the four of us, your martial art should actually be the worst."

"You all have good shifus; I don't," Guo DaLu protested.

Wang Dong: "But since that day you fought the black-clothed man, he suddenly discovered that, though our martial arts are higher than yours, if we got into a real fight against you, perhaps none of us would actually be your match."

His voice cold, Guo DaLu replied, “He may not even believe his own words.”

Wang Dong: “But I believe them because my opinion is the same as his.”

Guo DaLu: “Oh?”

Wang Dong: “Your martial arts may be inferior to ours, but in actual combat with people, you are able to adapt and act accordingly to the circumstances and control your opponent before he has his chance to act. To borrow from a clichéd saying: you are someone who has an amazing inborn gift, a rare talent for learning martial arts. And so...”

Guo DaLu: “And so, we should have a duel to confirm it, right?” There was still a strong explosive feel in his words.

Wang Dong ignored him again and continued smilingly, “And so you should cheer up and practice your martial arts diligently. If you could find a good shifu, maybe you might even become wulin’s number one martial master.”

Guo DaLu suddenly released a lengthy sigh. “Right now, I do not want to find a good shifu. I only want to find a good doctor.”

Wang Dong: “Why?”

Nibbling on his fingernail, Guo DaLu stammered, “Because... because I am sick.”

Nibbling on his fingernail, Guo DaLu stammered, “Because... because I am sick.”

The expression on Wang Dong’s face shifted rapidly as he asked, “You are sick? What sort of sickness?”

Guo DaLu: "A very strange sort."

Wang Dong: "How come you never mentioned anything before?"

Guo DaLu: "Because I..... I cannot say it." His entire face was covered in a look of pain. It did not seem at all as if he was joking. Wang Dong, though, did not press him further because he knew that the more insistently he asked, the more Guo DaLu would refuse to say anything at all. Sure enough, since he did not inquire anymore, Guo DaLu could not contain himself and asked, "Have you not noticed that I have changed a bit lately?"

Wang Dong brows were puckered as he agreed hesitantly, "Hmm... it appears you have a bit."

"It's because I am sick," Guo DaLu sighed.

Wang Dong probed, "And do you know where your illness is located?"

Pointing at his own chest, Guo DaLu answered, "Right here."

Wang Dong frowned, "You have a sickness of the heart?"

Guo DaLu's expression grew even more pained.

Wang Dong: "There are many types of sicknesses of the heart. As far as I know, the most severe one is lovesickness – could it be that you are lovesick?"

Guo DaLu was sighing incessantly now.

Wang Dong laughed and pointed out, "Lovesickness is not something to be ashamed of. Why are you not willing to say it out loud? Maybe I could even be a matchmaker for you."

Guo DaLu was clenching his teeth together forcefully. A long while passed and then suddenly, he grabbed Wang Dong by the shoulders. "Are you my good friend?"

Wang Dong: "Of course."

Guo DaLu: "Good friends should guard each other's secrets, right?"

Wang Dong: "Of course they should."

Guo DaLu: "I have a secret that I have kept for a long time now, and if I don't say it out, I'm afraid I will go crazy. But... but even though I want to say it, I am scared that you will laugh at me."

Wang Dong: "You... don't tell me that what you have is... is a sexually transmitted disease?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

Wang Dong breathed a sigh of relief. "Then it's all right. Feel free to say it. I will not laugh at you."

Guo DaLu struggled in indecision for another half a day. At last, with a distressed look, he confessed, "There are also many types of lovesickness. The one I have, though, is the most shameful type."

Wang Dong: "Why is it shameful? 'A graceful and fair lady, the gentleman wishes to be with. Wish is unfulfilled, toss and turn he shall.' This has always been a principle of Heaven and Earth. What is there to feel ashamed about?"

Guo DaLu: "But... but... my lovesickness is not for a woman."

Wang Dong paused in surprise for a long moment before inquiring carefully, "Could your lovesickness be for a man?"

Guo DaLu nodded his head, looking nearly as if he was going to burst out into tears.

A look of terrible fear seemed to overcome Wang Dong's face. Deliberately lowering his voice, he whispered, "It wouldn't be me, would it?"

As Guo DaLu stared back at Wang Dong, he did not know whether he wanted to cry or laugh. All he could do was scowl as he retorted, "My sickness has not reached that stage of severity yet."

Seemingly relieved, Wang Dong laughed, "As long as it is not me, everything is all right also." Suddenly, his voice dropped again. "Is it Lin TaiPing?"

"You've seen a live ghost," Guo DaLu snapped.

Wang Dong's brow was wrinkled for a long time before he his countenance brightened and he said, "I understand now. The one you like is Yan Qi."

Guo DaLu did not say anything.

In a laidback tone, Wang Dong said, "Really, I could see that a long time ago. You always like to be with him."

His face pulled into a painful grimace, Guo DaLu replied, "Before, I did not really notice there was anything wrong. I just figured it was because we are very good friends. But then later... later..."

Wang Dong blinked. "What happened later?"

Guo DaLu: "Later... later something was not quite right."

Wang Dong: "What was not right?"

Guo DaLu: "I cannot really say either what wasn't right. Anyhow, as long as I am with him, there is something particularly different about my mood.

"How is it different?" Wang Dong pressed. He really was 'smashing the earthenware pot to get to the bottom of it' and was not willing to let go even a little bit.

Guo DaLu: "Different is just different... In any case... in any case, it's just different." Saying that was equivalent to not saying anything at all.

Wang Dong appeared as if he was not able to stop himself from breaking out into laughter, but in the end, he finally managed to contain it. Putting on a serious look, he comforted, "Really, that cannot be considered a shameful thing."

"That's not shameful enough?" Guo DaLu moaned. "A real man like me would actually..."

"You are not the first person with this sort of inclination," Wang Dong pointed out. " 'Duan xiu fen tao.' [literally, duan xiu means 'cutting the sleeve' and fen tao means 'dividing peach'¹⁵; saying refers to homosexuality.] Even our good old kings and emperors have had this pastime, and in fact, their stories have been told through the ages. In my opinion, you and him should just..."

Jumping to his feet, Guo DaLu glared furiously at Wang Dong and seethed, "So it turns out you actually are not my friend. I misjudged you."

Wang Dong pulled him back. "Don't get angry, don't get angry. I was just trying to test you. Actually, I have noticed for a long time now that there is something not quite right about Yan Qi."

Guo DaLu was taken aback by this. “What is it about him that is not quite right?”

It was not easy but Wang Dong managed to not burst out in mirth. Pulling his face into a serious look, he asked, “Have you not noticed that this person seems to have a rather bizarre [orig. word is xie, which carries meanings of evil, abnormal, heretic] air about him?”

Guo DaLu: “Bizarre air? What kind of bizarre air?”

Wang Dong: “Even though we are all such good friends, he still guards against us like he is guarding against thieves. When he goes to sleep, he always will first bolt up his doors and windows, right?”

Guo DaLu: “Yes.”

Wang Dong: “Every time he leaves here, he always does it by sneaking out, as if he is afraid we will tail him, right?”

Guo DaLu: “Yes.”

Wang Dong: “He seems like he never bathes, yet his body does not smell at all. The clothes he wears may be grimy and tattered, but his room is cleaner than anyone else’s here... What do you say? Aren’t all these points a little bizarre?”

Guo DaLu’s face seemed to have grown a little pale. “Are you trying to say that he is...”

Wang Dong cut him off, “I am not saying anything, nor am I saying that he is part of the demon cult.” All of a sudden, he broke into a fit of coughing because if he did not cough then, he was afraid he would start laughing.

Guo DaLu's complexion grew even whiter while his lips repeated the same two words over and over again: "Demon cult... demon cult..."

After coughing for half a day, Wang Dong finally managed to hold back his laughter and spoke again, "I have merely heard that there are few husband-wife pairs in the demon cult that are a little unusual."

Guo DaLu: "How are they unusual?"

Wang Dong: "These husband-wife couples, the husband is a man and the wife is a man also."

Guo DaLu appeared as if he had just been struck out of nowhere by an arrow as his entire body leapt into the air. Clutching onto Wang Dong tightly, he rasped, "You... you have to help me out here."

"You... you have to help me out."

Wang Dong: "How do you want me to help you?"

Guo DaLu: "Think of a way to get in a big quarrel with me."

Wang Dong: "Big quarrel? How do you want to quarrel?"

Guo DaLu: "However you want to quarrel. Doesn't matter. Just the bigger the quarrel, the better."

Wang Dong: "Why do you want to quarrel?"

Guo DaLu: "Because after we have a row, I will have an excuse to leave here."

Wang Dong's face changed, seeming to have realized that his joke might have gone too far. A long while passed before he finally put on a forced smile and said, "You do not really need to leave. Actually, he..."

He seemed as if he was about to divulge some sort of secret, but Guo DaLu interrupted, "Actually, I do not really intend on leaving. I just want to get away from this place for a temporary period of time."

Wang Dong: "And then?"

"And then I will wait for him at the foot of the mountain. As long as he steps out, I can tail him in secret and see where he actually goes and who he meets up with." Guo DaLu heaved a lengthy sigh and added, "No matter what, I must learn what secret he is keeping."

Wang Dong grumbled, "Why can you not wait here at home?"

Guo DaLu: "Because if I just follow him from here, he will discover what I'm doing."

Wang Dong: "Don't tell me you are going to go down the mountain to disguise your appearance."

Guo DaLu: "Mm."

Wang Dong: "You know the art of disguises?"

Guo DaLu: "No, but I have my own ways."

Tilting his head, Wang Dong deliberated for quite a while until, at last, he said slowly, "Since you have already made up your mind to do it that way, then there is no reason why you shouldn't, except..."

Guo DaLu: "Except what?"

Wang Dong: "If we want to get into a squabble, we should at least do it realistically, otherwise he will not believe it."

Guo DaLu: "That's right."

Wang Dong: "That is why we have to wait for an opportunity. We certainly cannot just start fighting for no reason."

Guo DaLu: "What kind of opportunity do we need to wait for?"

Chuckling, Wang Dong reassured him, "Though I do not really like getting into fights with people, it won't be overly difficult for us to find an opportunity to have a row."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because what you say usually cannot be considered words from a human being anyways."

Guo DaLu started laughing also. "If Yan Qi was here right now, I could start a fight with you just for that."

Wang Dong: "Right now, I am only worried about one thing."

Guo DaLu: "What are you worried about?"

Wang Dong: "I am worried that he will help you and side with you in the quarrel and afterward, he'll leave with you too."

Batting his eyes, Guo DaLu told him, "You do not need to worry about that point."

Wang Dong: "Oh?"

Guo DaLu: "If I can get in a spat with you, do you think I wouldn't be able to get in one with him?"

"Of course you can," Wang Dong snickered. "Sometimes the things you say are enough to annoy the population of an

entire city. Regardless of who gets in an argument with you, I still would not find it the least bit surprising.”

Before Guo DaLu had a chance to open his mouth and respond, they suddenly heard a cry of fear echoing out from the woods. The sound of a young girl’s voice was screaming, “Save me.... Save me!”

Most men who hear a girl crying “save me” will immediately rush over. Even if it is not in his mind to save her, he will still hurry over for a look. In every man’s life, there will more or less be one or two times when he fantasizes about being ‘a hero rescuing a beauty.’ It is too bad that such chances do not arise often in real life.

But now, the chance had come. How could Guo DaLu let it pass? Without waiting for action from Wang Dong, Guo DaLu sprang to his feet and darted over.

Unfortunately, it seemed he was still a step too late. He had just jumped up when he saw a person charging like an arrow into the grove.

Most girls who cry, “Save me!” are usually not unattractive, but there are not many who are as beautiful as the girl who was crying, “Save me!” at that particular moment. The girl was not old, at most sixteen or seventeen years old, and her hair was combed into two large, silky braids that made her appear even more lively and delightful. On her arm, she carried a basket of flowers, and her fair-skinned, oval face had grown pale in fright as she ran in circles around a tree.

A burly, bearded man with a wicked grin on his face was chasing her around that tree. He was not very hurried in his pursuit, though, for he knew that this girl was like food that was already in his mouth: she had no hope of escaping his clutches.

Who would have thought that an unexpected obtruder would suddenly interfere? Fortunately, the obtruder was merely a young lad who looked not all that different from a girl. And so, without waiting for Lin TaiPing to open his mouth, he barked, "You little b**tard! Who told you to come? If your arrival ruins my happy deed, then you better be careful because I will rip your head off."

Lin TaiPing's facial expression was calm as he asked, "What happy deed is that?"

Sneering, the man spat, "Can't you tell what your daddy is doing here?"

The young girl had dashed over to hide behind Lin TaiPing. Gasping for breath, she quavered, "He is not a good person. He... he wants to pick on me."

Unperturbed, Lin TaiPing told her, "Do not worry; no one can pick on you anymore."

The burly man snarled in fury, "Little b**tard, are you trying to shove your nose into someone else's business?"

Lin TaiPing: "It would seem so."

Letting out a mad roar and like a lion ravenous lion pouncing on a sheep, he leapt viciously towards Lin TaiPing. It appeared that he had at least a few days worth of martial arts training. Not only was his lower body sturdy and stable, his attack was extremely quick as well.

It was unfortunate for him, though, that the one he encountered was Lin TaiPing.

The instant Lin TaiPing waved his arm, the man tumbled backwards like a wild dog that had just been given a sharp

kick. Feelings of shock and anger collided in him as curses poured from his lips.

He seemed to want to crawl back up to his feet and throw himself all out into the fight again, but all of a sudden someone had already seized ahold of his collar and hoisted him up off the ground. This person possessed enormous strength and furthermore, his build was not shorter than than his either.

Guo DaLu had finally caught up, and now, he carried the man by the collar over to Lin TaiPing. "How do you say we should take care of this scoundrel?" he asked with a little smile.

Lin TaiPing replied, "That will depend on what this guniang [miss] wants to do."

The girl was still shaken and her body was still quivering. Guo DaLu went up to her, and with a wink, grinned, "This person was bullying you. What do you say if we butcher him up and feed him to the dogs?" The girl gave a terrified cry and was so frightened that she nearly fainted as her body collapsed against Lin TaiPing.

Guo DaLu laughed uproariously, "I was only joking. Even dogs would not want to sniff a stinking scoundrel like him." With a wave of his hand, he ordered, "Get out of here! The faster, the better; the further, the better." Without needing Guo DaLu's prompting, the burly man had already scurried off, tripping and crawling as he went.

Only then could the young girl breathe a sigh of relief. Her face flush with color, she straightened herself back up before falling gracefully to her knees. "Thank you, young sir, for saving me, otherwise... otherwise..." Her eyes started to grow red again and she could not even continue speaking. It

almost seemed as if she wished she could embrace Lin TaiPing's feet in order to express the great amount of gratitude that she felt in her heart.

Lin TaiPing's face, too, had reddened.

Guo DaLu chuckled, "It was not only this one young sir who saved you. I had a part in it too. Why are you not thanking me?"

The young girl blushed an even deeper shade and was even more flustered about what to do.

Luckily, at this time, Yan Qi had hurried over. Glowering at Guo DaLu, he snapped, "She has already suffered enough and you still want to pick on her?" Pulling the girl back to her feet, he addressed her, "That guy has some problems. You do not need to pay any attention to him."

The young girl's head was lowered as she said, "Thank... thank you."

Yan Qi: "Why would a young girl like you come to such a place with a person like that?"

The girl's head dropped down even further as she explained haltingly, "I sell flowers. He said that there was someone here who wanted to buy my entire basket of flowers and so... and so I came along with him here."

"This world has more bad men than good ones," Yan Qi told her with a sigh. "Next time, you must be more cautious."

Lin TaiPing piped in suddenly to ask, "How much is your whole basket of flowers?"

Flower vendor-girl: "Three... three..."

Lin TaiPing: "Alright. I will give you three liang of silver. I am buying your entire basket."

The flower vendor-girl raised her head and gazed at him, her tender eyes filled with gratitude. Lin TaiPing, though, was blushing again and he actually turned his head away, as if he did not dare face her.

Guo DaLu looked first at Lin TaiPing, then over at the flower vendor-girl. Out of the blue, he asked, "Little miss, what would your name be?"

However, the flower vendor-girl appeared to be very fearful of him. The instant he had opened his mouth, she was so frightened that she retreated back a couple of steps.

Guo DaLu: "Do you live at the foot of the mountain? Did you only move here recently? How come I have never seen you before?"

Her face was red and her head was lowered while she nibbled on her lip without speaking a single word.

Snickering, Guo DaLu spoke again, "What aren't you saying anything? Don't tell me you are a mute."

The flower vendor-girl looked as if she wanted to say something, but in the end, nothing came from her lips. All of a sudden, she whipped her head around and ran off. They watched as her two big braids swung to and fro behind her. She had darted off quite a distance when, suddenly, she turned around to peek at Lin TaiPing.

Pulling out all the flowers from her basket, she placed them onto the ground and said, "These flowers are all for you." Her cheeks blushed even more furiously and then, she was dashing away even faster than before, as if she was afraid that someone would chase after her.

“That little girl’s nerves are rather weak,” Guo DaLu chuckled.

Yan Qi retorted, “After seeing that ferocious look of yours, even a woman with stronger nerves would still be frightened away by you.”

“I merely asked her a few questions, that’s all” Guo DaLu objected.

Yan Qi shot back, “What does her surname, her name, or where she lives have to do with you? Why would you want to ask all that?”

Giggling, Guo DaLu said, “I wasn’t asking for myself.”

Yan Qi: “Who were you asking for?”

Guo DaLu pursed his lips at Lin TaiPing, then answered grinningly, “Have you not seen the look on the face of our amorous young sir over there?”

Lin TaiPing appeared as if he had not heard anything. With his eyes still fixed upon the place where the young girl’s outline had disappeared from view, he seemed somewhat dazed.

Spring was not too far gone yet. The morning wind still carried the coolness of spring. As Guo DaLu pushed open the door and breathed in a deep breath of fresh air, it seemed like the courtyard’s spring breeze had all flowed into his chest. Every morning, he would always be the first person to awaken because he felt that idling away that perfectly good amount of time on the bed was such a waste.

However, when he pushed open his door today, he discovered that Lin TaiPing was already standing inside the courtyard.

Standing there staring off at nothing.

Guo DaLu gave a couple light coughs. He did not hear anything. Guo DaLu knocked on a railing. He still did not hear anything. His eyes were staring unwaveringly at a cluster of peonies by the corner of the wall, but what was his heart thinking about? Guo DaLu walked quietly over towards him, and then suddenly announced in a loud voice, "Good morning."

Lin TaiPing finally heard him now and at the same time, was nearly scared out of his wits. Turning his head around and seeing Guo DaLu, he forced a smile. "Good morning."

Guo DaLu looked intently at his face. "Your eyes are all red. You did not sleep well last night, did you?"

Lin TaiPing: "I was thinking... spring seems to have passed now."

Guo DaLu nodded in agreement. "That's right. Spring has passed. It actually just left us yesterday."

Lin TaiPing: "Left us yesterday?"

Guo DaLu smiled lightly, "Could it be that you do not know? Yesterday, when that young girl ran off, didn't spring also leave with her?" Lin TaiPing's cheeks burned a crimson color. Heaving a deliberate sigh, Guo DaLu lamented to himself, "Where has spring gone? Who knows? If someone actually knows where it is headed, why not call it back or go fetch it to live here together?"

Red-faced, Lin TaiPing snapped, "Is it possible for you to say just a few less indecent words?"

With a grin Guo DaLu returned, "Were those words wrong? Could it be that you don't want spring to stay?"

Lin TaiPing: "I..."

His mouth closed abruptly because right at that moment, the sound of melodious singing suddenly drifted in on the spring breeze:

"Little young miss daybreak arises,
Carrying a flower basket to the market.
Passing through the main street, walking through the
alleyway,
'Flowers for sale, flowers for sale,' her voice a-crying.
Flowers may be pretty, flowers may smell sweet,
But if no one buys them, what to do?
Carrying the flower basket and her empty purse
Papa, mama, how could she return to face them?"

The singing was sweet and beautiful and also seemed to make the heart ache a little. Not only was Lin TaiPing completely taken by it, even Guo DaLu seemed to be in a stupor as he listened. After a long while, he finally exhaled a sigh and murmured, "It appears that spring did not go far, and now it has returned." All of a sudden, he gave Lin TaiPing a shove. "Why aren't you going outside? What are you doing still standing here?" he laughed.

Blushing again, Lin TaiPing asked, "What would I go outside for?"

Batting his eyelids, Guo DaLu reminded, "Someone gave you so many flowers yesterday. You should at least express some sort of appreciation to her." Lin TaiPing was still hesitant, but

in the end, as he put on a show of reluctance, he was pushed out the door by Guo DaLu.

The morning mist had dissipated; sunlight shone upon the earth.

A young girl, a flower basket in hand, was treading on that sunlight-covered earth and walking over slowly. Raising her head, she suddenly noticed Lin TaiPing. All of a sudden, the sunlight that had been everywhere seemed to all collect on her face. Or maybe half of it had actually gathered on Lin TaiPing's face too.

Guo DaLu looked first at him, then at the young girl. Retreating quietly, he closed the door and left the two of them alone outside. The gentleness of the spring breeze was like that within the gaze of lovers. Guo DaLu was smiling, feeling extremely happy in his heart. With his hands clasped behind his back, he ambled slowly through the courtyard.

He had not intended on going to find Yan Qi, but when he raised his head, he realized unexpectedly that he had already arrived in front of Yan Qi's door. Such a beautiful spring scene. How could you not share it with your friend?

At last, Guo DaLu stretched out his hand and knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer. Even louder knocking brought no response. How could Yan Qi be sleeping so deeply? Guo DaLu called out in a loud voice, "The sun is shining on the head already. You still haven't gotten up?"

It was quiet on the other side of the door. There was not even a hint of stirring.

Behind him, though, there was a sound. It was Wang Dong's voice: "He is not in the courtyard at the back or in the kitchen."

Guo DaLu's complexion changed slightly and he could not help shoving open the door. The door had actually been left unlocked, and the instant Guo DaLu pushed it open, it seemed like the spring brilliance in the courtyard also got shoved out.

There was no one inside the room. The covers on the bed were still folded neatly, but apart from those, there was nothing else. Not only was Yan Qi not inside but all of his odds and ends belongings were missing as well.

Guo DaLu stood motionless in that place. His hands and feet had grown ice-cold.

Wang Dong's brow had creased into a frown. "From the looks of it, he left last night," he thought out loud.

Guo DaLu: "Mm."

Wang Dong: "Why did he take all of his belongings with him this time? Why didn't he leave a single word to us?"

Guo DaLu suddenly whirled around and seized ahold of Wang Dong's shoulders. "Last night, you didn't tell him anything, did you?"

Wang Dong: "What do you think I would have told him?"

Guo DaLu: "Those things that I told you."

Wang Dong: "Do you think I am that type of person?"

Guo DaLu: "You honestly did not say anything?"

Wang Dong let out a sigh before he said, "There is no longer any need for us to get in a quarrel; otherwise, just for that one question, I could get in a fight with you."

Guo DaLu stood there in a daze for a long time before he too finally heaved a sigh and slowly released his grip.

With a forced smile on his face, Wang Dong consoled, "Really, you don't need to grow anxious. He has snuck out before but he came back after a few days."

Shaking his head, Guo DaLu said with a bitter smile, "You just said so yourself: this time is different."

Wang Dong: "But he has no reason to leave without saying goodbye."

His head hanging low, Guo DaLu said, "Maybe... maybe he is the same as me and feels that something is not quite right also, so... so it is better just to leave."

Wang Dong hesitated a moment before saying, "There actually is nothing wrong between you two."

Guo DaLu's smile was agonized. "That still isn't something wrong?"

Wang Dong: "Actually, he... he..."

Guo DaLu: "He what?"

Wang Dong was looking at him intently. After quite some time had passed, he suddenly shook his head. "Nothing... nothing..." Without waiting for the conversation to end, he turned his head and left.

"Where are you going?" Guo DaLu called after him.

Wang Dong: "To find a cup of wine and have a drink."

In reality, Wang Dong was not a person who could bury what he wanted to say in his heart. It was just that he felt that some things were better left unsaid because he believed

that it may be better if Guo DaLu did not know certain matters. The more you know, the more you may actually agonize.

Unfortunately, not knowing will also cause you to feel troubled just the same.

Now, spring really had gone far away. Where had spring gone?

No one has ever known the answer to this.

“Little young miss daybreak arises,
Carrying a flower basket to the market...”

The sweet sound of singing could be heard every morning. So long as he heard the singing, Lin TaiPing would feel that spring had come back again.

But Guo DaLu’s spring had left and did not return. Yan Qi was like the spring breeze: once he departed, there was not a trace, and once he was gone, there was no further news of him.

“Where has he gone? Why did he not leave a single message?” Guo DaLu was determined to find out the reason.

And so, he also headed out. He only left one sentence before going: “Until I find him, I will not come back! ”

There was less laughter inside Wealthy Manor. Even though the weather was getting hotter and hotter with each day, Wang Dong felt that this place was growing colder and colder.

Only that sweetly beautiful singing could still be heard everyday. Aside from this, the only other thing that would allow people to feel slightly happy was that Hong NiangZi's injuries had completely healed now.

One day, she and Lin TaiPing were sitting under the eaves keeping Wang Dong company. The heavens had been a brilliant blue, but all of a sudden, black clouds rolled in across the entire sky. Then, the summer thunderstorm came pouring down. The rain was like a heavy curtain hanging down from the eaves. The wilted flowers in the corner had been washed away to some unknown place.

Wang Dong gazed at that curtain of rain. All of a sudden, he exhaled noisily and mumbled, "Spring really has passed."

In a gentle tone, Hong NiangZi comforted, "Although it is gone now, it will be back very quickly."

Lin TaiPing added, "That's right. No matter how far spring may go, it will always return."

"For certain?" Wang Dong asked.

"For certain!" Lin TaiPing replied.

End of Chapter 38

Chapter 39 - Ill-Starred People Drifting in the World

Thunderstorm.

Drops of rain struck Guo DaLu like falling pebbles. He finally roused.

A dirty alleyway. A low wall.

Only when he awakened did he realize that he had actually been lying in mud by the corner of the wall. As for why he was sleeping there and how long had he been asleep, he did not even know himself. All he remembered was the previous night, he and the buddies from the east side of the city had all gone to the gambling hall belonging to the laoda [biggest brother; this context, gang leader] of the west side. The brawl had resulted in utter chaos and a complete mess.

Afterward, the east end's laoda had laid out a large merit-celebration feast specially for him in Little Winter Melon's brothel. Twenty, thirty brothers had taken turns filling him up with wine. The east side's laoda had even pounded his chest and, in the presence of everyone, declared that so long as Guo DaLu was able to bring down the west end gang, the territory on the west side of the city would go to him. And then, Guo DaLu seemed to recall, they had bowed down together and become sworn brothers.

Everything after that, though, he was even more fuzzy about. It seemed like Little Winter Melon's little sister, Little Honey Peach, had supported him into the back and had been helping him remove his boots and clothing. But all of a sudden, he insisted on leaving to go out and find Yan Qi. Little Honey Peach tried to hold him back but in the end,

received a slap across the face instead. And then, he had discovered himself lying here. That big chunk that happened in between was a complete blank.

Actually, strictly speaking, he was not too certain even how he had passed the time in the last half a month. He had originally intended on looking for Yan Qi, but amidst the vast sea of people, where would he go to find him? And so, when he arrived here, he simply decided to stay. Every day, he would go out like crazy to find prostitutes and get intoxicated.

One day, after drinking until he was completely hammered, he somehow got in a conflict with the east end's laoda, and their exchange of blows led them to become friends. At the time, the laoda of the east end was being dominated by the west side's gang such that he felt as if he could not even breathe. Guo DaLu had slapped his own chest and guaranteed that he would help him to vent his angers. Hence, he had gotten mixed in with these brothers of the east side.

Each day, they would drink, gamble, get in fights, and go find women, and everyday would be filled with shouts and laughter. The days had actually passed quite merrily.

Why was it, then, that after every drinking fest, he would slip out by himself and end up either collapsed in the middle of the road or lying in a gutter?

If a person wants to torture someone else, it may be a very difficult thing to do, but if he wants to torture himself, that is extremely easy. Was he deliberately tormenting himself?

Such a very hard rain.

The raindrops that battered down on him were like stones. Guo DaLu struggled and, with difficulty, stood up. His head was pounding so hard it seemed as if it would split open at any second, and his tongue felt as if a thick layer of moss had grown on it.

Was this sort of life really all that enjoyable? He did not want to think about it.

He was not willing to think about anything. In fact, it would be best if there was no time in the day where he was sober and awake.

He stretched his neck, trying to catch a few mouthfuls of rain to drink, but even though the raindrops were numerous and very densely spaced, the number that actually fell into his mouth was not many.

Are there not many things in the world that are just like this? You are looking right at it and you should be able to get hold of it, but yet, you actually are not able to. You are angry, agonized; you bang your head against the wall and torment yourself until you don't even seem human, yet none of this serves any use at all.

Guo DaLu forced himself to stand up straight with his shoulders back. But his chest, his heart felt like there were needles piercing them. Something that he clearly should not be thinking about, why did he still think about it then?

With a loud clap of thunder, lightning came streaking down. Gritting his teeth together, he started walking forward with large strides. He had just taken two steps, though, when suddenly a small door up ahead opened with a "creak." A girl-child dressed in scarlet clothes, her hand holding a flowered oil-paper umbrella, was standing in that doorway

looking at him with a charming smile. As she smiled, two deep dimples could be seen on her cheeks.

With such a sweet, young girl smiling at you, no man would be able to avoid going up and saying a few words just to make conversation. However, Guo DaLu was not in the mood for that. His mood at the present was even worse than his appearance.

The little girl, though, actually came out to meet him. Smiling sweetly, she said, "I am XinXin."

Guo DaLu gave her a couple of glances. Nodding his head slowly, he acknowledged, "XinXin. Good. A good name." Before waiting for the conversation to finish, he started to leave again.

But XinXin was still unwilling to let him off as she spoke up again smilingly, "I recognize you."

Only then did Guo DaLu find this a little strange. He stopped and turned around. "You recognize me?"

XinXin batted her lashes at him. "Are you young master Guo?"

Guo DaLu was even more perplexed. "Have you seen me somewhere before?" he could not help asking.

XinXin: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Then how would you know me?"

Enchantingly, she replied, "You will know when you go ask my household's xiaojie [young miss]."

Guo DaLu: "Who is your household's xiaojie?"

XinXin: "You will know when you see her."

Guo DaLu: "Where is she?"

XinXin's lips curled up in a little smile. "If you come with me, then you will understand everything." She turned around and walked back through that small doorway before turning her head back and beckoning to Guo DaLu. "Come." Guo DaLu did not say anything as he strode inside. His curiosity had been aroused now, and if you wanted to convince him not to go in, it would not be easy to do.

Beyond the door was a little courtyard, and amid this torrential downpour, the wisteria blossoms covering the lattice inside appeared particularly vulnerable. From the eaves hung a few birdcages, and the orioles in them were chirping noisily, as if they were blaming their master for being inconsiderate and not bringing them into her private chambers.

XinXin stepped into the corridor, and with her fair, petite fingers, flicked the birdcage lightly. "Little rascals," she scolded, "Xiaojie is having a visitor in her room today. If you keep making all this ruckus, she won't pay any attention to you." She turned her head back to smile at Guo DaLu as she said enchantingly, "Look at that. You haven't even gone in yet and they are already jealous."

Guo DaLu could only smile in response. Now, in his heart, aside from curiosity, there was also a sort of feeling that he could not even describe, a sweet sensation, like there were butterflies in his stomach. But what was this all about?

He still felt as if he was in fog ten miles thick, not able to even feel out a shadow. "Have I suddenly run into a bout of luck in romance?" Except that, even if the maid was pretty, it did not mean that the xiaojie would be also be very beautiful. What would he do if the xiaojie looked like a hag?

A curtain made out of mottled bamboo hung from the doorframe and it had surely just recently been put in as the weather started growing hotter.

Inside the doorway, there were no sounds of people. Lifting up the curtain, XinXin invited him in a sweet tone, "Please go in and have a seat. I will ask Xiaojie to come out."

It was a small, elegant living room inside. On the ground, there was even a thick Persian rug. Even Guo DaLu could not help wiping the mud off the bottom of his feet first before stepping inside. "Why would the master of a place like this invite a guest like me inside?"

Of course, there must be a motive. What sort of motive?

Guo DaLu looked over himself. From top to bottom, what was on his body was not even worth five qian silver in total.

He grinned to himself. Finding the most comfortable and clean chair, he sat himself down. There was a pot of tea on the table, and it was actually just freshly steeped. A few small dishes held some very exquisite teatime snacks. Guo DaLu poured some tea for himself and sipped at it while nibbling some dried apricots. It was like he was a frequent guest there, not the least bit shy or worried about courtesies.

Then, he heard the tinkling sound of bracelets. XinXin finally came back in, holding lightly onto her xiaojie's arm. As Guo DaLu raised his head to look, his eyes bulged out in astonishment.

As Guo DaLu raised his head to look, his eyes bulged out in astonishment.

It was not that Mr. Guo was a young chap who had never seen women before, but it truly was extremely rare to see such an exceptionally beautiful woman. How could anyone but such a great beauty be worthy to live in such a place?

A piece of dried apricot was still in Guo DaLu's mouth. He had completely forgotten about swallowing it or removing it from his mouth.

He did not know when, but this young miss had sat down directly across from him now. On her face, which was suitable for both expressions of happiness or anger, there seemed to be a tinge of pink, but it was uncertain whether that was from rouge or embarrassment. A pair of eyes, bright like the waters of autumn, were filled with tenderness as they gazed at him.

Guo DaLu was starting to feel a little uneasy. He wanted to open his lips to say something but instead, ended up accidentally swallowing that half-eaten dried apricot in his mouth so that it became stuck in his throat. XinXin could not suppress her giggle. A "pfft" escaped, and then, once the mirth started, it would not cease. Clutching her stomach, she fell into hysterical laughter that did not end.

The xiaojie frowned at her, as if she was reprimanding her for laughing inappropriately, but she, too, could not stop a smile from spreading onto her own face. Guo DaLu was watching them, and then he also broke out into loud guffaws. The sound of his laughter was louder than anyone else's. Regardless of how serious or awkward the situation may be, once Guo DaLu started laughing, everything would loosen up.

The shy, demure xiaojie finally spoke, and her voice was as gentle as her appearance. "This place is not very adequate," she said softly, "but since Guo Daye [respectful, 'mister',

‘sir’, ‘master’] you have come, please do not feel the need to be overly polite and hold yourself back...”

Guo DaLu interrupted with a chuckle, “Do I look to you like someone who would hold himself back?”

Her voice was sweet as she replied, “No.”

Giggling also, XinXin spoke up, “The tea just arrived from Pu’er. Xiaojie had asked someone to bring it back for her. Guo Daye should drink a couple more cups to help you sober up from the wine.”

“The tea is indeed quite good, but you are mistaken,” Guo DaLu said.

Surprised, XinXin asked, “How am I mistaken?”

Guo DaLu: “No matter how good a tea may be, it still cannot sober anyone up.”

XinXin: “Then what do you need in order to get sober?”

Guo DaLu: “Wine.”

XinXin laughed, “Won’t drinking more wine make you even more drunk?”

Guo DaLu: “You are mistaken again. Only wine can sober you up from the effects of wine. It is called, ‘soul returning wine.’

XinXin blinked at him. “Really?”

Guo DaLu: “This method was developed from my many years of personal experience. It definitely cannot be wrong.”

The xiaojie also broke into a smile. “If that is the case, hurry and pour Guo Daye some wine.”

The wine came. It was a good wine. Of course, the dishes of food were not bad either.

Guo DaLu drank merrily to his heart's content. He really appeared as if he already considered this xiaojie to be an old friend of his and was not the least bit worried about courtesies.

The young lady seemed to be able to take in a couple of drinks too. The wine tinted her cheeks pink so that her beauty shone even more brilliantly. Guo DaLu's eyes were fixed unwaveringly on her, and he even appeared to have forgotten to drink his wine. Lowering her head, she said softly, "If Guo Daye you will drink another three cups, I will drink one to accompany you."

Three cups of wine disappeared down into Guo DaLu's stomach in the blink of an eye. "I have a few things I need to tell you," he spoke unexpectedly.

The xiaojie replied, "Please feel free to say them."

Guo DaLu: "One: My name is not Guo Daye; it's Guo DaLu. My friends call me Xiao Guo [Little Guo] but it seems that now, I have gradually turned into Lao Guo [Old Guo]."

"Some people will never grow old," the xiaojie remarked in her captivating voice.

"And some people can never be a daye," Guo DaLu returned. He downed a few more cups before continuing, "I am just a poor wretch, and I'm dirty and smelly. You, though, are a welloff young miss. You do not even know me. Why would you invite me here for drinks?"

"We are both ill-starred people who are drifting along in this world," she answered. "Were it not for the hand of fate, how else could we have come to know one another?"

XinXin jumped in, “My household’s xiaojie is surnamed Shui and her personal name is RouQing. Now, you can say you know one another.”

Clapping his hands, Guo DaLu said with a smile, “Shui RouQing. A good name. It is worth downing three cups for it.”

Shui RouQing’s eyes were lowered shyly. “Thank you.”

Guo DaLu tossed back another cup. He stared at her until, after a long while, he suddenly said, “I am a very frank person. No matter what they may be, I cannot keep any words inside me.”

“I can see that you are a true man with a heroic spirit,” Shui RouQing responded sweetly.

Guo DaLu: “Then let me ask you: is someone bullying you and you need me to help you out?”

XinXin broke in again, “My household’s xiaojie does not ever step out of her dwellings. How could there be someone bullying her?”

Guo DaLu: “Have you run into a very difficult problem that you would like me to help you to solve?”

XinXin: “Neither.”

Guo DaLu stated, “Since I have come here and have drank your wine, so long as you say it, no matter what the request may be, I will still make every effort to do it.”

In a gentle tone, Shui RouQing told him, “As long as you have such an intention, my heart is already content.”

Looking intently at her, Guo DaLu asked again, “You really do not have anything that you would like to ask of me?”

Shui RouQing: “I really do not.”

Guo DaLu: “Then why are you being so kind to this smelly, dirty poor wretch?”

Shui RouQing lifted her head now to look at him, her eyes tender. Under such a gaze, how many people could actually not feel intoxicated? XinXin looked at Guo DaLu, then over at her xiaojie before suddenly giggling, “There is a saying. Have you ever heard it before, Guo Daye?”

Guo DaLu: “Go ahead.”

XinXin: “The Son of Heaven values a hero. A beauty also likes a true hero.”

Shui RouQing’s face grew a deeper shade of pink as she scolded in her charming voice, “Little rascal. If you keep wagging your tongue, just watch to see if I don’t tear up your lips.”

XinXin laughed, “I am also a very frank person, and I am not able to hold in any words that are in my heart either.”

Blushing, Shui RouQing rose to her feet as if she really was going to go strangle her. XinXin, though, merely giggled adorably and dashed away like a wisp of smoke. As she ran outside, she did not forget to close the door for them.

Shui RouQing stood there unmoving, her head lowered, but she could not help casting a glance over at Guo DaLu, who was still staring at her. Her cheeks were now flushed so that they were as red as the sunset glow of a fall evening.

Intoxicated. Right then, right there, even someone who was not drunk would become intoxicated.

Guo DaLu suddenly grasped her hand tightly. Her hands were cold like ice; her face burned like fire. Guo DaLu wanted to pull her into his embrace but before he had a chance, with a light cry, she had already fallen into his arms.

Guo DaLu wanted to pull her into his arms but before he had a chance, with a light cry, she had already fallen into his embrace.

Outside the shutters, it was already midsummer, but inside the window, spring was in its height.

The feeling of spring was so rich it could not be melted away. Some people may not have known each other previously, but the instant they meet, they are like iron that has encountered a magnet and immediately bond together closely.

Shui RouQing was pressed against Guo DaLu. Her skin was soft and smooth like satin, her waist gracefully slender. Guo DaLu's arms were wrapped around her waist when he suddenly let out a sigh. "I do not understand. I really do not understand."

Shui RouQing told him softly, "There are some matters that, right from the beginning, there is no way to explain them and no one who can understand them."

Guo DaLu: "You had never before met me and did not know what sort of person I am. Why are you like this to me, then?"

Shui RuQing: "Even though I had never seen you, I had known for a long time what sort of person you are."

Guo DaLu: "Oh?"

She nestled her body even closer against him as she explained gently, "In these last several days, who in the city does not know that, from a faraway place, there has arrived a strong and courageous man who neither fears the Heaven nor the Earth?"

Guo DaLu: "Strong and courageous man? Do you know what the meaning behind 'strong and courageous man' is?"

Shui RouQing: "I will listen to your explanation."

Guo DaLu: " 'Strong and courageous man' can sometimes also be called 'thug' or 'scoundrel.' "

In her melodious voice, she replied, "I don't know, then. All I know is that a strong and courageous man is a strong and courageous man."

Guo DaLu gave a laugh. Stroking her waist gently, he smiled, "You are truly such a strange woman."

Shui RouQing: "That is why I have fallen for such a strange man like you." As she finished saying this, she began blushing again.

Guo DaLu gazed at her. "Before, I would never have even dreamed that I could meet a woman like you, much less even thought that I could be with you like this."

Shui RouQing's face burned even more furiously. "So long as you are willing, then I will forever be with you like this," she told him quietly. Guo DaLu looked intently at her for another long while. At last, he gave a sudden sigh and, turning over onto his back, stared wide-eye up at the ceiling. "You're sighing?" she asked.

Guo DaLu: "No."

Shui RouQing: "You are thinking about things that are troubling your heart?"

Guo DaLu: "No."

She turned over also and lay against his chest. Gently caressing his face, she said tenderly, "I only want to ask you, are you willing to be with me forever like this?"

Guo DaLu was silent for a very long time before, uttering each word clearly, he answered, "I am not willing."

Her soft, supple body suddenly seemed to freeze. "You are not willing," she repeated, her voice hoarse.

Guo DaLu: "It is not 'not willing', it is 'not able'."

Shui RouQing: "Not able? Why are you not able?"

Guo DaLu gave a slow shake of his head.

Shui RouQing: "What does it mean that you are shaking your head? You do not like me?"

Exhaling a long breath, Guo DaLu replied, "A woman like you, if there is a man that does not like you, then he must be sick. But..."

Shui RouQing: "But what?"

With an agonized smile, Guo DaLu stated, "But I am sick." Shui RouQing stared at him, an expression of alarm in her lovely eyes. Guo DaLu continued, "I am a man, and it had been a long time since I had been with a woman. You are an extremely beautiful woman and you are so good to me. In addition, this place is so soothing, and we had also consumed some wine. Under such circumstances, how could my heart not have been moved? And so..."

Shui RouQing was biting down on her own lip. "And so, you were just fooling around with me."

Guo DaLu sighed regretfully, "But there is no true love between the two of us. I..... I..."

Shui RouQing: "You what? Could it be that there is someone else in your heart?"

Guo DaLu nodded.

Shui RouQing: "And there is love between you and her?"

Guo DaLu nodded, but then suddenly switched and shook his head instead.

Shui RouQing: "So is there true love between you or not?"

With another sigh, Guo DaLu answered, "I do not know either what sort of feelings those are. I really do not know. When I cannot see him, every second, every moment, I will be thinking of him. You are beautiful, kind and gentle and I like you very much, but in my heart, nobody is able to take his place."

Shui Rou Qing: "And so you are still going to continue to look for him?"

Guo DaLu: "I must find him."

"And so, you must leave?" she pressed. He closed his eyes and nodded in response. Shui RouQing gazed at him. There was no condemnation in her eyes and, in fact, she appeared to be moved. After a long moment, she breathed out a sigh of lament and said softly, "If there was one man in this world who would love me like that, I... even if I were to die, I would do so willingly."

“Sooner or later, you will find someone like that,” Guo DaLu comforted.

Shui RouQing shook her head. “It will never happen.”

Guo DaLu: “Why?”

She was quiet for a very long while before saying unexpectedly, “You are a good person. I have never seen as good a person as you before, so I will tell you the truth.”

Guo DaLu was listening.

Shui RouQing: “Do you know what type of person I am?”

Guo DaLu: “You are surnamed Shui. You are Shui RouQing, a noble young lady and, furthermore, you are gentle and beautiful

“You are wrong. I am not any rich or noble lady. I am just a... a...” Her lip was clenched between her teeth. All of a sudden, she heaved another lengthy sigh. “I am just a prostitute.”

“Prostitute! ”

Guo DaLu nearly jumped straight up off the bed and exclaimed loudly, “You are not.”

She smiled, a very miserable smile. “I am. Not only that, I am the courtesan with the highest status and worth in this place. Unless a man is one of the rich and influential who extravagantly spends thousands in gold at one time, he has no hope of being my guest and entering beyond my curtain.”

Guo DaLu paused in surprise for quite a while before finally mumbling, “I am not anyone rich or influential, and I do not

even have one piece of gold on me.”

Shui RouQing suddenly stood and went to open a drawer on her dressing table. Holding a handful of pearls in her palm, she informed him, “Even though you, yourself did not spend thousands in gold for me, someone else already paid me in your behalf.”

Guo DaLu was even more flabbergasted. “Who was it?”

Shui RouQing: “Perhaps it was your friend.”

Guo DaLu: “Could it have been the laoda of the east city?”

In an indifferent tone, Shui RouQing responded, “He is not worthy enough to come here to my place.”

Guo DaLu: “Then who could it be?”

Shui RouQing: “It was someone I had never seen before.”

Guo DaLu: “What did this person look like?”

Shui RouQing: “It was a person with a pockmarked face.”

Bewildered, Guo DaLu echoed, “Pockmarked face? Amongst my friends, there is not a single one who has a pockmarked face.”

“But he indeed gave these pearls to me specifically as your payment,” she pointed out. Guo DaLu was so stunned that he could not even speak. Shui RouQing added, “He told me to wait well upon you. No matter what you wanted, I was to provide it to you.”

Guo DaLu: “And that is the reason you...”

She did not allow him to continue and interrupted, “But he had also calculated that there was a strong possibility you

would not be willing to remain here.”

Guo DaLu: “Oh?”

Shui RouQing: “He had something to tell you, but only after you expressed that you were unwilling to stay.”

Guo DaLu: “What is it?”

“Something very bizarre.” She continued very slowly, “A few months ago, a very odd client suddenly showed up here. He was just like you: his clothes were dirty and tattered. I had wanted to chase him out of here.”

Guo DaLu: “What happened after?”

Shui RouQing: “Once he entered, however, he laid out 100 liang of gold on the table.”

Guo DaLu: “So you let him stay?”

A trace of hidden bitterness seemed to float up in her eyes as she said in a dull tone, “I have always been a woman that does this type of business. I only recognize gold, not people.”

Guo DaLu sighed, “I understand, but... but you do not seem to be that sort of woman.”

Shui RouQing suddenly turned her head away from him. It seemed as if she did not want Guo DaLu to see the expression that was on her face. A long while went by until she finally carried on in measured words, “The world has always been filled with spoiled rich boys who like to deliberately dress up like that as their way of seeking out pleasure and messing about with other people. That part was not what was odd.”

Guo DaLu: “Then what was odd?”

Shui RouQing: “What was odd was that he had spent 100 liang in gold but did not so much as touch me. All he did was take a bath here, and then he got dressed in a set of my clothes and left.”

“Got dressed in a set of your clothes?” Guo DaLu repeated.

She nodded.

“So is he actually a man or a woman?” Guo DaLu asked in bewilderment.

“When he came, he had originally been a man, but after he put on my clothes, this person was even more attractive than me.” A bitter smile touched her lips as Shui RouQing said, “To be honest, I have seen many many weird people – some like me to use a whip to thrash them or stomp on them with my feet – but I have never before seen someone like him. In the end, even I could not discern whether he is actually a male or female.”

Guo DaLu was still in silence again but his eyes now had lit up. It seemed that he had a faint inkling about who this person she was talking about was. “Only now have I said all this because the man with the pockmarked face had instructed me again and again that, if you were willing to stay here with me, I should never tell any of this to you.”

“Do you... do you know what that strange visitor’s name is?” He appeared so tense now that even his hands were beginning to tremble.

Shui RouQing: “She did not give her name. She only told me that her surname is Yan. ‘Yan’ as in sparrow.”

Leaping up, Guo DaLu gripped onto her shoulders tightly. "Do you know where he is right now?" he rasped.

Shui RouQing: "No."

Guo DaLu fell back two steps, and he seemed as if he was no longer able to support himself on his feet. With a "plop", he fell back down and sat on the bed.

Shui RouQing: "But she recently came back another time."

Guo DaLu immediately shot up like an arrow. "When is 'recently'?" he demanded loudly.

"Just ten or so days ago," she replied. "This time when she came, she appeared to have many matters troubling her heart. She drank a lot of wine in my place and then, the next day, she put on some of my clothing and left."

Growing even more anxious, Guo DaLu asked, "Do you know where he has gone?"

Shui RouQing answered, "I do not know." Guo DaLu looked as if his legs were going to give, but fortunately for him, she added hastily, "But when she was drunk, she spoke many drunken words. She said that once she went back this time, she would never be able to return here and I would never see her again."

Guo DaLu: "Did you... did you ask her where her home is?"

Shui RouQing giggled, "I had originally asked that only offhandedly and had not thought that she would actually tell me."

His eyes brimming with an earnest sort of hope, he pressed, "But yet she did tell you?"

Nodding, Shui RouQing told him, “She said her home is in Jinanfu and also said that even the West Lake cannot compare with the spring scenery of the Daming Lake there. She told me if I had the opportunity in the future, I should definitely go there for a stroll.”

Guo DaLu suddenly fell back down again, like someone who had been running for several days and nights and had endured thousands and ten thousands of hardships before finally arriving at his destination. But although he had collapsed, his heart was filled with joy. Shui RouQing was looking at him with tenderness in her eyes. “The one you are looking for is her?”

Guo DaLu nodded.

Shui RouQing: “Does she know that you are so head over heels in love with her?”

Guo DaLu nodded his head again, then stopped and shook it instead – who could know the heart of a woman?

Breathing out a light sigh, Shui RouQing said quietly, “Why would she leave? If it were me, even if you used a whip to try and chase me off, I still would not go.”

“She is not you... She is also a strange person,” Guo DaLu murmured. “All along, I have never really understood her.”

Shui RouQing’s voice was sad as she agreed, “She is not me. That is why she left. Only a woman like me is able to truly understand that there is nothing in the world more precious than love.” Sighing, she lamented, “A woman who does not treasure a true love will regret it for the rest of her life.”

Guo DaLu was quiet again for a long time. “Do you think she really is a woman?” he asked out of the blue.

Shui RouQing: "Even now, you still do not know the answer to that?"

Falling backwards so that he was lying faceup on the bed, Guo DaLu exhaled a lengthy breath and muttered to himself, "It is a good thing I at least finally know one thing."

Shui RouQing: "What is that?"

There was a slight chuckle in his voice as he answered, "I do not have a sickness... not one little bit. I am just blind, that's all."

Nightfall.

The setting sun shone upon the window, upon the new set of clothing that Guo DaLu had just changed into. He looked like he had transformed into a completely different person. There was a glow to his countenance and he was also very sober.

Shui RouQing was looking at him and nibbling on her lip as she asked, "You... you are leaving now?"

Guo DaLu replied with a smile, "To be very honest, I wish I could grow a pair of wings and fly out of here." Her head was lowered, and her eyes were showing once again an indescribable sort of hidden bitterness and misery. As Guo DaLu looked over at her, his smile gradually faded and his eyes filled with pity. He could not help reaching over to pat her shoulder as he comforted, "You are a very nice girl. There will be a day when..."

With a sorrowful laugh, Shui RouQing continued for him, "There will be a day when I will also find a man like you, is that right?"

Forcing a smile, Guo DaLu answered, "Correct answer."

Shui RouQing made herself put on a slight smile also. "When you see Yan guniang [Miss Yan], do not forget to send my regards."

Guo DaLu: "I will."

Shui RouQing: "Tell her that, in the future, if I get the chance, I will definitely go to Daming Lake to visit the two of you."

"Maybe we will end up visiting you first," Guo DaLu said with a laugh. Although he was laughing, for some reason, there still seemed to be a twinge in his heart. He really could not bear to stay any longer, to see those eyes of hers. Whipping his head around abruptly, he stared out at the setting sun beyond the window and mumbled, "The sky is not dark yet. I still have enough time to travel a stretch road."

Her head hanging low, Shui RouQing responded softly, "Yes, it really would be best if you hurried and left. She may actually be waiting for you to find her."

Guo DaLu gazed at her and looked as if he wanted to say something, but in the end, he did not utter a word.

And so he left and walked outside. If he did not leave, then what else could he do? It was better just to go – to go very quickly.

Shui RouQing suddenly called after him, "Wait."

Guo DaLu turned around slowly. "You..."

Shui RouQing did not allow him to get his sentence out. Retrieving a pale purple embroidered purse from within her garments, she handed it to him and said gently, "This is for

you. Please pass it on to Yan guniang. Tell her... tell her that it is my gift to you two as a token of my congratulations.”

“What is it?” As he accepted it, though, he did not need to ask any further. He could feel the smooth roundness of the pearls inside.

Shui RouQing had turned back around, not even glancing at the sunset outside the window. “You can go now,” she stated coolly. Guo DaLu gripped tightly onto that purse. Was her heart not just like those pearls inside the purse, also held so tightly in his hand?

She did not turn her head back again. Neither did he say anything again. Some words just need not be said.

Both were ill-starred persons drifting along in the world. It mattered not that they were strangers before.¹⁶

Perhaps only ill-starred persons in the world could truly understand the emotion, and the mood of that moment. It was so desolate and lonely, yet at the same time, was it not so beautiful as well?

End of Chapter 39

Chapter 40 - The Village Girl

Off in the distance, the mountains were a dark green color. The waters of the lake were a clear, deep blue. Those dark green mountains were being reflected in the lake, merging the two colors so the blue seemed brilliant like the jade-green and the green rich like the blue color.

Guo DaLu wandered forward slowly along the lakeshore like a roving soul. He neither had a purpose nor a direction that he was following. When he had heard news of Yan Qi, he had wished that a pair of wings would grow from his ribs so he could fly straight to Jinanfu, as if so long as he was able to get there, he would immediately be able to find her.

It was only now, since he had arrived there, that he realized his way of thinking had been too naïve. This d*mn Jinanfu was really not that small. Inside the city, there were at least hundreds, even thousands, of households and tens of thousands of people. Trying to find Yan Qi in such a large place and amid so many people was like trying to fish a needle out of the sea.

All he could do was wander around everyday like an aimless soul, hoping that there would a day where his luck was particularly good and he could run into Yan Qi. And though the chance of this happening really was too slim, he also knew himself that any chance, regardless of how slim it was, was better than no chance at all.

By now, he was nearly able to list off how many trees were growing beside the lakeshore. Beneath a weeping willow up ahead, a small boat was anchored to sell lotus seed pods and fresh lotus root. The young girl who rowed the boat knew him well already. From far away, she beamed at him,

her smile brilliant like the sun. For that smile alone, Guo DaLu had to go over and buy some lotus seed pods from her.

The heart of the lotus is bitter, just like Guo DaLu's heart was right then.

Other people would have only been able to buy six seed pods with two fen of silver, but Guo DaLu was able to buy seven or eight of them. This young girl, who was wearing a wide-brimmed bamboo hat and whose pale feet were bare, seemed to very much fancy Guo DaLu.

Once he came over, she would always give him a couple extra and, sometimes, would even secretly stuff a fresh lotus root to him. In the past, Guo DaLu may have already sat himself into the boat, rowed it out into the center of the lake, and been kissing her little apple cheeks or caressing those pale white feet. But now, Guo DaLu was not in the mood for that. He already had enough worries.

He accepted the lotus seed pods and was about to leave when, unexpectedly, the young girl beckoned to him. "Come here," she whispered to him secretly. "I have something to say to you."

Guo DaLu really did not want to bring any more troubles onto himself, but he did not have the heart to refuse this young girl's kindness either. He sighed inwardly and was preparing to put on the face of a good big brother.

If the girl tried to ask him out on a romantic rendezvous, he would have to teach her a good lesson and tell her that none of the men in the world are good people and it was fortunate that the one she encountered was him because otherwise, she would have been deceived by now.

As his thoughts reached this point, he felt that he practically was like a saint. What a pity that Heaven would not allow him the opportunity to be a saint. He placed one foot on the bow of the boat and deliberately pulled his face into a frown. "What do you want to say?"

The young girl's eyes seemed to be glowing as she hissed, "Are you an undercover high-ranking government official who has disguised himself in order to understand the conditions of the commonfolk?"

Guo DaLu was completely taken aback by this and stood there stunned for quite a while. He could not hold in a laugh as he countered, "From my head to my feet, which part of me looks like a high-ranking government official?"

"You're not?" the young girl asked.

Guo DaLu: "Not only am I not one, I will actually start to tremble when I do see a high-ranking official."

The young girl's expression grew even more thrilled. Dropping her voice even further, she said, "Then that means you must be an infamous bandit."

With a wry smile, Guo DaLu answered, "Nope. For me, even if I was a bandit, I would end up losing my money."

Staring intently at him, she tested, "You honestly aren't?"

Guo DaLu: "Why would I lie to you?"

The girl sighed, obviously extremely disappointed with this. She seemed as if she could not be bothered to say anything to him anymore. So the only reason she had been interested in Guo DaLu was because she thought he was a thief. In the eyes of an adolescent girl, a bandit really was much more alluring than any other type of person.

Only now did Guo DaLu realize that she had not truly been interested in him. He also had no need to worry about bringing troubles onto himself anymore. This should have been a happy thing, but yet, for some reason, he actually felt slightly disappointed. Feeling a little unwilling to accept this, he inquired, "What about me made you think I was a bandit?"

The young girl's manner towards him had already grown cold. "Because these last couple of days, I always seemed to have a feeling that there is a person tailing you."

Guo DaLu: "Oh? What sort of person?"

Young girl: "Sometimes, this person dresses up as a peddler while other times, he will disguise himself as a beggar. However, no matter how he dresses himself up to look, he still has no hope of trying to hide from me."

Guo DaLu: "Why is that?"

A smug look came over her face. "Because I can recognize his face in one glance."

"Is there something out of the ordinary about his face?" Guo DaLu asked.

Nodding, the girl replied, "His face is all pockmarked." Guo DaLu nearly could not stop himself from leaping into the air. Even his blood seemed to be pumping much faster. The young girl looked at him again, her eyes filled with an expression of hope. "So is he tailing you? Do you know him?"

Guo DaLu batted his eyes at her and, purposely lowering his voice, said, "If I tell you the truth, you are not allowed to tell anyone else."

"I swear, I won't tell anyone," the girl immediately promised, "otherwise may my face be covered in pocks too."

In a furtive voice, Guo DaLu said, "Alright, I will tell you. That pock-faced man is a very famous constable, and he really is here to follow me."

The girl became excited again. "Why... why is he following you?"

Guo DaLu's voice grew even quieter. "Because I really am a notorious thief. Others call me 'The Grand Thief Who Flies All Over the Sky.' I just recently committed seven, eight big crimes in the capital city, so I came here to lay low and wait everything out."

Trembling in exhilaration, the young girl nibbled her lip as she asked, "You... you aren't a 'thief who picks flowers' [rapist], are you?"

Guo DaLu held in a guffaw as he winked and returned, "What do you think?"

The young girl's face was burning so brightly it looked like a freshly roasted red sweet potato. Still nibbling on her lip, she spoke, "Even if you are, I am not scared of you. I..... I....." Her legs seemed to have grown weak so that she was unable to stand and nearly fell into the water.

Roaring in laughter, Guo DaLu stretched his hand out and stroked her cheek. "Don't you worry. Even if I was to come find you, we would have to wait for two to three years to pass. You are still just a child right now." Laughing loudly, he shook his sleeve and swaggered off.

The young girl watched him go, staring blankly for a long while. Maybe consciously or maybe unconsciously, she

reached up and discreetly felt her own chest. The red glow on her face had spread to the base of her ears.

Guo DaLu was secretly amused, knowing well that the girl undoubtedly would not be able to sleep that night. He was not deliberately trying to be cruel to her. He merely wanted to add some spice, some colour into this girl's ordinary life so that some day in the future, when she was married and had children and was washing dishes, she had a memory to reminisce about that made her beat faster.

How many girls in the world have actually seen a real "thief who picks flowers"?

End of Chapter 40

Chapter 41 -Tailing the Pock-Faced Person

The breeze blew, rustling the weeping willows and rippling the surface of the lake.

Guo DaLu was still strolling along slowly, peeling the skin off the lotus root and humming a little tune. After walking what could be considered a fair distance, he abruptly whipped his head around and noticed straight away that behind him, with a broken dish in hand, was a beggar. What's more, this beggar had a pockmarked face.

The instant he turned back to look, the pock-faced man hid behind a tree. This man's skill in following people really was not all that good. If Guo DaLu had not been so preoccupied with his own thoughts these last two days, he would have detected his presence a long time ago. Was this man with the pockmarked face the same one that Shui RouQing had spoken about?

Casually, Guo DaLu turned around and, with small steps, ambled over in the direction of that pock-faced man. He had planned that, as he got close to the man, he would suddenly jump forward and seize ahold of him.

But the pock-faced man, surprisingly, was on his guard and immediately turned and sped back along the way they had come. When Guo DaLu picked up his pace, the man's footsteps would instantly quicken also. Out in broad daylight and in front of so many people, it would be rather ridiculous to use lightness kung fu, so all Guo DaLu could do was lengthen his strides and chase after him. In the beginning, it had been the man who was following Guo DaLu, but now,

things had changed so that it was Guo DaLu pursuing him instead.

The girl on the boat gawked at them with an expression of surprise on her face as, one in front of the other, they ran past. She really could not understand why a constable would not try and catch a thief and would actually be chased by the criminal instead.

To her, there were just too many things in the world that could not be explained and that was why she always felt troubled and worried. But as she gradually grew older and the number of things she knew became more and more, she finally truly understood that life had actually been happier when she did not know anything at all.

Early summer. The time for enjoying the lake.

On the lakeshore, young men and ladies were dressed up in bright, attractive clothing and tourists were swarming around. Of course, where there were many tourists, there would also be particularly many beggars. People who come out to have a good time are exceptionally generous, especially when there is a flower-like beauty at their side. And so, in that crowd of people, there were beggars to the east and the west. This time of the year had always been their busy season, so even the laziest of beggars was out and about today.

As the pock-faced man wove around in the crowd, there were several times that Guo DaLu nearly lost him. It was fortunate that Guo DaLu's luck was quite good. Every time he reached a critical moment, he would always manage to spot the pockmarks on that face. People with distinctive appearances have never been suitable for tailing someone.

After a while, the pock-faced seemed to grow nervous about the pursuit and left the lake area to head towards a place where there were fewer people. It was as if he wanted to lure Guo DaLu to an isolated place to take care of him.

Guo DaLu, however, was not the least bit concerned and in fact, pursued him with even more fervor. He had originally been planning to find a secluded spot, seize the man, and question him until everything was clear – did he know Yan Qi and know her whereabouts. It was true that Guo DaLu had learned a thing or two from GunZi regarding the technique of making people tell the truth.

He had thought that he would be able to catch up to the pock-faced man very soon, but surprisingly, not only was the man incredibly swift, his endurance was also rather good. It seemed like he never grew tired as, amazingly, he was in fact running quicker and quicker. Guo DaLu, though, was starting to feel as if he would not be able to last much longer.

With the lifestyle he had been living recently, one day was enough to make a person age one year. He could not help yelling, “Wei! Don’t run! I do not want to give you trouble. I just want to ask you a few questions.” The pock-faced man had not really been exerting himself before, and when he heard this, he actually unleashed his strides and tore off.

It was a common occurrence to see beggars being chased around as they ran wildly all over the streets. Whether he was being chased by a person or a dog, no one seeing this would find it out of the ordinary. However, a person dressed all neat and smart pursuing a beggar and running haphazardly around the streets was probably a little absurd.

Guo DaLu knew that people were starting to pay attention to him, two of whom appeared to be real constables. These two

had been patrolling the neighbourhood, and now, they were preparing to bar the way in front of Guo DaLu and ask him what was going on. Once Guo DaLu was obstructed, the man with the pockmarked face would immediately be able to run off and vanish without a trace. This was his one lead and Guo DaLu would definitely not let it escape easily.

His eyes glinted and he suddenly acted first to gain control of the situation. Pointing at the pock-faced man racing in front of him, he shouted, "That beggar is a pickpocket! Anyone who helps me capture him will be rewarded with twenty liang."

That last sentence was very effective. Without waiting for him to finish, the two constables had already turned around to chase after the pock-faced man. People were also standing off to the side cheering and jeering.

The pock-faced man appeared to be truly nervous now, and with a sudden leap, he had flown over five or six people's heads and onto the roof of a house up ahead. His lightness kung fu was very profound such that his skill was actually among the first-class of jianghu. But with this display, even the people who had not wanted to be nosy began jeering, "It seems that this person is not only a thief but a cat burglar as well. He absolutely must not be allowed to get away! "

The number of people creating the uproar may have been many, but there was not a single one who could go up on a roof to chase a person. Those two constables were only able to stand at the foot of the wall and watch with angst. After all, lightness kung fu was not something everyone could learn, and at most, only one or two out of 100,000 people had lightness kung fu that could compare with the pock-faced man's.

Fortunately, Guo DaLu was amongst those one or two.

He also swept over the crowd and scurried onto the roof as loud shouts came from his lips: "I am a constable from the capital city who has come here specifically to capture this cat burglar. I hope that the heroes and good men from all around will lend a hand in assistance."

He knew that, no matter where those heroes and good men came from, they would not come meddle in this very odd business of someone else. He was shouting and calling out loudly like this because he wanted to make the pock-faced man panicked and flustered. That was because he really did not have confidence that he could catch up to him.

Even though he had practiced his lightness kung fu and had reached a level where it was quite good, he had not had many opportunities to put it in actual use. Regardless of whether one was comparing skill or experience, he still seemed to be a notch lower than that pock-faced man.

Sure enough, though, the man appeared to have grown nervous as a result of his shouts. Out there in broad daylight, there a person was leaping and soaring over someone else's eaves. That really was too big of a target to miss. And so, he was finally forced to jump back down to the ground.

Down below was what could not be considered a very wide lane. Altogether, there were only six or seven households in it. As Guo DaLu sped over there, he was just in time to see the man's shadow flit away and through the front doorway of one of the households near the entrance of the lane. This family's door was actually open. No matter how peaceful the times may have been, there were not many households who left their door open all day long. This family must have some relations with the pock-faced man and, perhaps, this place was even his house.

Without giving any thought, Guo DaLu immediately followed after him and charged inside. There was no one in the courtyard. However, up ahead in the living room, someone was laughing and saying, "No wonder people always say, 'Out of ten pockmarked people, nine are weird.' You really are a monster."

In exultation, Guo DaLu darted inside with one large stride. "This time, there is no way you can escape now! "

But, inside that living room, there was not even half of a pockmarked person.

But, inside that living room, there was not even half of a pockmarked person, only a man and a woman who appeared to be a married couple, teasing and bantering flirtatiously with one another in that place. The woman was fair and plump and was very pretty. The man's complexion, however, was sallow, and he looked emaciated and as if he could not even stand up straight.

When a man has too beautiful a wife, there are times when it is not considered good fortune.

They were shocked when they saw this big man charge in from outside. The husband's nerves appeared to be weaker than his wife's as he nearly tripped on top of her in fright. "Who... who are you?" he stammered. "What do you want to do here?"

"I'm here to find someone," Guo DaLu replied.

The husband: "Find... who?"

Guo DaLu: "A pockmarked person. Where is the pockmarked person that you were speaking about just a moment ago?"

The wife's shimmering eyes had been fixed on Guo DaLu the whole while, and now, she suddenly stood and jumped in, "The pockmarked person he was talking about just now is me. Could it be that you are looking for me?" Sure enough, on the tip of her nose, a few faint pockmarks could be seen.

Guo DaLu paused in surprise.

The wife was still gazing at him from the corner of her eye. Smiling faintly, she asked, "Did you come looking for me because you came in admiration of my name? Unfortunately, you are too late. I am married now and no longer take clients."

Not only did Guo DaLu pause this time from astonishment, he practically did not know whether he should laugh or cry. He should have been able to deduce this from the start. What kind of woman from a respectable background would keep looking at a man like that?

The man at last displayed some of his authority as the husband. Jumping up loudly, he barked, "Did you hear that? She is my wife now and everyone else should just forget about trying to come near her. Get out of here now!"

Guo DaLu could only smile wryly, but he could not help inquiring, "Just now, no one else came in here at all?"

The wife cast another glance at him and giggled, "Even if there are other reckless rascals in the city like you, they do not have the gall that you do. Who would dare charge into someone's home and ask for someone else's wife?" She actually believed that he was a lecher who had come there specifically to look for her.

The husband's anger flared up even fiercer. Shoving a finger in Guo DaLu's nose, he bellowed, "Why are you not going

yet? What sort of stupid thoughts are you still harbouring? You be careful, you, that I don't smash your head with my fist."

Guo DaLu laughed. The man's hands looked like chicken feet. They may not have even been able to kill a fly, and yet he still wanted to beat someone up with them. Patting the man on the shoulder, Guo DaLu chortled, "Don't you worry. No one is going to come steal your wife, but your own body is not a stolen prize either.

It'd be good to care of it a little bit. No matter what, you should not exert yourself too much." He did not wait for the man to open his mouth in reply before, with a flourish of his sleeve, he had turned around and left.

He knew those words of his had been rather spiteful. Normally, he would never have said things like those, but when a person is feeling angry and frustrated, he will often want other people to experience a little bit of misery too.

He had plainly seen the pock-faced man go inside. How could he have suddenly vanished? Could he really have burrowed into the ground the instant he stepped inside? Obviously, that husband and wife couple were in cahoots with the pock-faced man and had planned out in advance to put on an act for Guo DaLu to watch. Guo DaLu knew this very well, yet he had no way of exposing them.

Plus, there he was barging into someone's home in broad daylight. When all was said and done, he had been the one who was in the wrong. And if you had told him to force them to take him around and search each room, he would not have been able to make himself do that either.

Moreover, the pock-faced man had undoubtedly already seized the opportunity to sneak away, and there was no way

Guo DaLu would have found him.

The more Guo DaLu thought over this, the more annoyed he became. "If it had been Wang Dong, the pock-faced man would have had no hope of escaping." He decided to find a place to drink and gorge down a big meal as a way of comforting himself, and then he would come back at night to investigate and get to the bottom of everything. He had already made up his mind that he would loiter around this place. Until he found the pock-faced man, he would not let things rest so easily.

It was already nearing sundown, and it was not too early anymore to be drinking. The biggest restaurant in the city was called Hui Bin Liu. Their signature dishes were 'three ways to eat one duck' and live sea bass. The 'Fen wine' that had come from Fenyang was rather strong too.

Guo DaLu found a seat near the window and ordered a table full of dishes. Before he had left, the east end's laoda had given him quite a large sum of money for the journey. Sometimes, those knight-errants of the streets were even more loyal and more true as friends than the heroes of jianghu.

Usually, Guo DaLu only needed a few cups of wine in his belly before his mood would immediately brighten. However, in these last couple of days, when the wine entered past his lips, it seemed to have a bitter taste, and additionally, he got drunk very easily.

Since there were matters that needed to be attended to that night, he did not dare drink too much so all he could do was scarf down on food. The worse his spirits were, the more he ate. If he did not find Yan Qi soon, it was possible that he would become even fatter than that duck.

As the sun set, the seats in the restaurant gradually started to fill. All manners and sorts of people were coming continually up the stairs, including an ugly, sly-looking pimp [gui nu; lit. 'turtle slave'] who, in answer to clients' requests, had brought with him some prostitutes dressed in glitzy attire.

And so, from a private room that was partitioned off to the side by a screen drifted out the sounds of [traditional] stringed and woodwind instruments and singing, joking and laughter, and the clinking of cups, all intermixed with shouts from dice gambling and the noise of drinking games and riddle guessing. It all felt very lively and bustling with excitement.

But Guo DaLu appeared as if he was sitting in a completely different world. This normally would have been something he would have been very interested in, yet now, it seemed to hold no appeal to him. Not having Yan Qi by his side was like not having salt in the food: dry and tasteless. Sighing, he slowly poured himself a cup of wine.

All of a sudden, he saw five or six pretty young girls swarming around a man, who was dressed in opulent brocaded attire and wearing a sword, while they all came up the stairs, giggling and laughing. Not just the waiters but even Guo DaLu could tell that this man in the magnificent clothing was a generous patron who threw away gold like it was dirt.

The tips he handed out would not be small. Guo DaLu could not help throwing another glance in that direction, but as his eyes landed over there, he nearly dropped the wine pitcher in his hand.

This wealthy patron in the garments of rich brocade was actually a pock-faced man, and furthermore, was the pock-

faced beggar he had seen today by the lake.

This wealthy patron in the garments of rich brocade was actually a pock-faced man, and furthermore, was the pock-faced beggar he had seen today by the lake. Just this afternoon, he was still a beggar, but come evening, he had suddenly turned into a rich man. The transformation really was too great.

No matter how he transformed himself, though – even if he turned into ash – Guo DaLu would still be able to recognize him in one glance. There were just too many pockmarks on his face.

Guo DaLu only stole a couple of glimpses before he quickly turned his head away to look out the window at the shop sign.

This time, he was determined to keep his cool and not act out rashly or blindly. If he went over right now, seized ahold of the pock-faced man, and questioned him regarding why he had given those pearls to Shui RouQing and did he know Yan Qi, other people would think he was a lunatic. And of course, the pock-faced man could just answer the questions with a few “I don’t know” and neatly brush off the entire situation.

The pock-faced man had gone into the private room now. The women who accompanied him were evidently not of any respectable sort of background. Before long had passed, singsong words of “little lover” and “dearest big brother” [intimate way to address a man] came echoing out. It was simply nauseating.

Strangely enough, the world contains many men who actually enjoy this sort of “music.”

Speaking from his conscience, Guo DaLu had to admit that he, too, had rather liked it before, but now as he listened to it, goosebumps formed on his entire body.

The key to whether a person will change for love lies not in whether that person is male or female but rather, in whether his love is true enough, deep enough.

The restaurant was still very lively.

Guo DaLu ordered another pitcher of wine and added a few more dishes. He was prepared for a drawnout battle. Even if the pock-faced man drank until daybreak, he would still keep calm and wait until daybreak.

End of Chapter 41

Chapter 42 - Dragon King Temple

But the pock-faced man surprisingly came back out very quickly. He was already completely intoxicated as he supported himself on the shoulder of a seventeen, eighteen year old girl and loudly asked a waiter where the restroom was.

So it seemed he had drank too much and was looking for a way out. Guo DaLu stayed cool, watching him as he walked downstairs, but after a long time passed, he still did not see him come back up. "Could he have discovered that I am here and is using the excuse of going to relieve himself as a means to escape?" Guo DaLu finally could not hold his impatience back any longer and was ready to charge down the stairs and chase after him.

Right at that moment, though, from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of someone across the street shuffling away with his head down. It was the pock-faced man. Sure enough, he was sneaking off.

In a moment of anxiousness, Guo DaLu leaped through the window. Patrons in the restaurant starting yelling loudly, thinking that someone had just tried to commit suicide by jumping out of the building.

The pock-faced man cast a quick glance over his shoulder, then in a flash, slipped into a grain shop on the other side of the street.

Piled by the entrance of the shop were bag after bag of flour and basket upon basket of rice, millet, and other various sorts of grains. A runny-nosed boy was kicking a jianzi [Asian shuttlecock; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jianzi>] near the doorway.

By the time Guo DaLu hurried over, the pock-faced man had once again disappeared so that even his shadow could not be seen. Inside, the worker and shopkeeper were leaning idly against the front counter playing a game of chess.

Judging from their laid-back manner, they certainly did not look as if they had just seen someone dart into their shop. Was it possible that these two people had also conspired with the pock-faced man ahead of time and were planning to put on another act for Guo DaLu?

Guo DaLu had learned, though, and was more clever this time. He did not go in and ask. Instead, he hid off to the side and beckoned the runny-nosed child to come over to him. Fishing out a string of coins, he smilingly enticed, "If you answer all my questions obediently, I will give you this string of coins for you to buy candy to eat."

The boy was holding the jianzi in one hand and wiping at his nose with the other while he stared at the money. Regardless of whether it is a child or an adult, there are not many who, when they see money, do not like it. "Do you understand? As long as you tell the truth, these coins will be yours," Guo DaLu said.

The boy immediately nodded his head and replied, "Everything I say is the truth. Papa told me that if children tell lies, their tongues will rot off after."

Patting the child's shoulder, Guo DaLu laughed, "That's right. The child who tells the truth is a good child. Is it your family who owns this grain shop?"

Nodding again, the boy told him, "My family has lots and lots of rice. Even if we eat for one hundred years, we won't finish all of it."

“Is there someone in your family with a pockmarked face?” Guo DaLu inquired.

The boy blinked, seeming very surprised. “How do you know?”

Guo DaLu gave a chuckle. Tricking a child into speaking the truth was not a difficult thing to do. However, an adult deceiving a child really was not something to be proud of. And so, feeling a little embarrassed, he first stuffed the string of coins into the boy’s hand before asking with a smile, “I have never seen anyone with a pockmarked face before. Could you bring me to go see?”

The boy was grinning now also. “Of course. He just went inside, and he’ll be coming out really soon.”

“He really will come back out?” Guo DaLu asked again.

The boy nodded. His eyes flit away briefly and then he giggled unexpectedly, “He’s already out now.” He was gripping tightly onto the coins with one hand, but the jianzi in the other hand had been tossed off to the side now as he went to tug the pockmarked person who had just stepped out of the grain shop over to Guo DaLu.

A little pock-faced person, only seven or eight years old.

Guo DaLu was taken aback, not able to cry or laugh.

The boy, however, was laughing very gleefully. “His name is XiaoSanZi. He’s my little brother and he’s had pockmarks on his face since he was little. We only have this pock-faced person in our family.”

Guo DaLu stood in shock for quite a while before finally turning around to leave.

Behind him, he could hear the boy chortle, “XiaoSanZi, if everyone who takes one look at you gives me a string of coins, we’ll be rich. You don’t need to worry then that you won’t be able to find a pretty wife in the future. As long as you have tons of money, even if you are pock-faced, people will still fight to marry you.”

Guo DaLu was both annoyed and amused, but he could not get angry, nor was he able to laugh. He knew those kids must think he was a walking patsy and a big, stupid oaf.

His thoughts were not all that different from theirs.

The instant he got back, he saw one of Hui Bin Liu’s waiters glaring at him, wearing one of those looks where the skin smiled but the muscles did not. “Keguan [respectful way to address a patron], your tab from just now is three liang, six fen of silver. You can even pack up and take away what is left of the duck bones, too.” Naturally, a waiter would not be very pleasant to a patron who had finished his wine, jumped out a window, and taken off.

There was not even a spark of anger left in Guo DaLu by now. He pulled out an ingot of silver and handed it to him. “That pock-faced man from a moment ago who had that really impressive manner,” Guo DaLu spoke up suddenly, “do you recognize him?”

The waiter accepted the ingot from him and briefly weighed it in his palm before a smile immediately came onto his face again. “Although I [original xiao de; literally ‘small’] do not recognize him, I can still send for those prostitutes who accompanied him here for you, sir.”

Guo DaLu: "The one I am looking for is the pock-faced man. Have you really never seen him before?"

The waiter shook his head. It was obvious that he found this very weird. "What is wrong with this person? He does not want those gorgeous girls and wants a pock-faced man instead."

Guo DaLu could not be bothered to say any more words to him. He knew, too, that if he went to ask those girls, he would not be able to get any answers regarding who that man was either.

That pock-faced man truly was very peculiar. He was apparently trying to hide from Guo DaLu, yet he always seemed to appear before Guo DaLu's eyes. If you were to say that this was not intentional, then how could there be such coincidences in the world?

Since the grain shop and the husband-wife couple had some sort of close relationship with him, he must have been in this city for quite some time already, yet other people seemed to have never seen him before. For no apparent reason, he had given pearls, worth thousands in gold, to Shui RouQing, all in Guo DaLu's behalf. It was certainly not without motive that he would do this.

But what was that motive? Why would he do all these unfathomable things? Even if you split open Guo DaLu's head, he still could not think of a single reason. He was nearly ready to give up on this person.

Then unexpectedly, the girl who had supported the pock-faced man down the stairs walked over towards him from across the way, her hips swaying. What's more, she was smiling and casting a coquettish look at him. The restaurant waiter looked at her, then over at Guo DaLu.

Secretly making a face, he slipped away. People in his line of work knew to be discreet and how to behave in these sorts of delicate situations.

The young girl had come up to Guo DaLu now and, smiling sweetly, addressed him, "This person here must be Young Master Guo."

Nodding curtly, Guo DaLu glared at her and responded, "Did the pock-faced guy tell you?"

The young girl also nodded. "I am MeiLan," she told him. "I belong to Liu Chun Yuan ["Keeping Spring Court"; this name is obviously one that belongs to a brothel]. In the future, Young Master Guo, you must come visit and support me."

"If you can find that pock-faced man for me, I will visit and support you everyday," Guo DaLu replied.

MeiLan batted her lashes. "Honestly?"

Guo DaLu: "The one who speaks but then does not keep his promise is a b**tard."

MeiLan smiled again, even more sweetly than before. "I came to find Young Master Guo precisely because that pockmarked master had a message he wanted to pass on to you."

Guo DaLu: "What message?"

MeiLan: "He said, tonight at midnight, he will wait for you at the Dragon King Temple east of Daming Lake. He also said... also said..."

Guo DaLu pressed anxiously, "What else did he say?"

In a hesitant tone, MeiLan answered, "He also said that if you do not have the courage to go, it is fine as well." She suddenly gave a charming giggle. "Now Young Master Guo, you are able to find him. Young Master, you should keep the promise you made – it is not a very pleasant feeling for a man when he turns into a b**tard."

And then, her hips swishing from side to side, this young girl, who was dressed up and adorned like a little demoness, finally left again. Before going, though, she did not forget to first give the address of Liu Chun Yuan to Guo DaLu.

Only now did Guo DaLu realize that he had said the wrong thing again. Why was it that he could not have kept his cool and just waited – waited for the little demoness to give him the message the pock-faced man had asked her to pass on? Why was it that he always somehow bafflingly managed to find lots of troubles for himself?

But that pock-faced man was even more baffling. Clearly, he was trying to hide from Guo DaLu, yet he arranged a meeting between the two of them. Could this be some sort of ploy? Could he have already prepared an ambush in the Dragon King Temple and was simply waiting for Guo DaLu to walk into the trap?

Even though he seemed to know much about Guo DaLu's matters, Guo DaLu had never even seen him before and certainly did not have any grudges or hatreds between them. He had put so much thought and money into all this, but what was the motive behind it?

Guo DaLu let out a sigh and muttered, "Out of ten pockmarked people, nine are weird. It seems this saying is not wrong in the least bit."

Dragon King Temple.

Where there was water, there always seemed to be a Dragon King Temple. Dragon King Temples seemed to be like the shrines of the [local] earth god¹⁷, which had become like ears on a deaf person, existing merely as a decoration. No incense burned in front of them and Taoist priests or monks were never there. This Dragon King Temple was the same.

Guo DaLu had ridden a donkey cart there because he did not know the route and also wanted to conserve his strength in order to deal with pock-faced man. The driver was an old man, who had a head of gray hair and was also hunchbacked.

Guo DaLu originally had not wanted to ride this particular cart, but other drivers were not willing to go to such a lonely and remote place as the Dragon King Temple at night. Indeed, this road was a difficult route to take. It was dark and there were no lamps.

All along the way, the old driver had appeared to be dozing off, but as they reached this place, he suddenly gave a clucking noise and reined in the donkey. Turning around, he remarked, "Straight ahead is the Dragon King Temple. You go yourself."

Guo DaLu could not help asking, "Why are you not taking me right to the door?"

The hunchbacked old man grinned unexpectedly, "Because this old life of mine wants to live for a couple years longer." The dim night was chilly and that smile seemed to emit a ghastly feeling.

Guo DaLu's brow knit together. "Are you not going to live if you take me there?"

The smile grew even more mysterious as the hunchbacked old man answered lightly, "Tonight, I fear that anyone who goes there will not come back alive. I would advise that it is best if you do not go."

Guo DaLu: "What is different about tonight?"

All of a sudden, the hunchbacked old man stopped speaking. His wide-eyed gaze was fixed unwaveringly on the darkness behind Guo DaLu, like he had suddenly seen a ghost.

His wide-eyed gaze was fixed unwaveringly on the darkness behind Guo DaLu, like he had suddenly seen a ghost.

Guo DaLu seemed to feel a tingle between his shoulder blades, and he could not help turning around for a look.

The night was still. There was no one. In the darkness, the willow branches stirred by the breeze did indeed look like individual phantoms writhing with threatening gestures.

But, at most, they only looked 30% like ghosts. Very few people would actually be frightened by them. A chuckle slipped out from Guo DaLu. "Go ahead and take me there. If you die, I..." His voice broke off.

When he turned back, the hunchbacked old driver had already disappeared.

Off in the distance, it, too, was a sheet of blackness. Not only were no humans visible, even if there really were ghosts, they would not be able to be seen either.

How did that hunchbacked old man suddenly vanish? Could he really have been snatched away by a menacing ghost that had been waiting in the dark to devour a human?

A gust of wind blew past. Guo DaLu could not restrain the shiver that came over him. "Fine. If you are not going, I will drive the cart there myself," he grumbled. When a person is alone in silence and darkness, hearing the sound of his own voice can help bolster his courage. Jumping up onto the front seat, he found the horsewhip and with a wave of it, tried to drive the donkey forward.

But for some reason, the donkey's four legs seemed as if they were nailed to the ground. No matter what, it refused to walk forward. Could it be that it smelled some sort of sinister omen up ahead?

Let us not even speak about ghosts eating humans. In this sort of place, this sort of circumstance, it would not have been surprising if humans ate other humans. Guo DaLu did not know the area or any person here, so if he really was eaten by someone, he would not have a place [in his afterlife] where he could plead his grievance, nor would he even know how to find his own skeleton.

If it had been someone else in his place, the best method to deal with the situation would have been to hurry back the way he had come, find a place to drink a couple cups of warmed wine, and then find a nice, comfortable bed to have a good sleep before even thinking about anything else.

Alas, Guo DaLu had a bit of a mule's temperament. If you wanted him to draw back, he would deliberately proceed forward instead. Even if up ahead was a dragon's pool or a tiger's lair, he would still charge in.

"You aren't willing to walk. Well, I have legs too. Do you think I cannot walk myself?" He leapt down from the cart and started to stride forward.

“Is Dragon King Temple really up ahead?” He still was not certain and could not see the outline of any building.

Up ahead, it was empty. Nothing could be seen. Nobody would ever arrange a meeting in this type of d*mned place.

Unless, that person had planned some sort of evil plot.

Guo DaLu threw his shoulders back and gave a cold laugh. From behind him, a strange sound suddenly echoed, like the sound of someone hissing. He whipped his head around before realizing that it was merely the neighing of the donkey – this donkey also seemed to have seen a ghost, appearing almost to be flying as it dashed back along the route they had come.

With a sneer, Guo DaLu muttered, “I am not a donkey. You can scare it, but you cannot scare me.”

He turned around and got a scare.

In the blackness before him, at some unknown time, a single lantern and a human shadow had materialized. The lantern glowed a green color. The sickly green light shone upon the person’s body and legs, but it did not reach the face. On his head, the person wore a very large, wide-brimmed bamboo hat. It was pulled down very low, nearly covering his entire face.

However, Guo DaLu could see that he was not the pock-faced man. That was because this person only had one leg. His left leg had been severed off at the knee and a wooden leg had been mounted in its place.

Yet, when he arrived, he had not made a single noise.

He stood there at a distance, one hand gripping the lantern and the other holding a black staff. It was not apparent

whether that staff was carved of wood or made of iron. Even though the man only had one leg, his bearing was steady and stable as Mount Tai.

In the middle of the night and in a place where there was no one to be seen in any direction, anyone, regardless of who it may be, would have been frightened if a person suddenly appeared in front him. But Guo DaLu very quickly recovered his composure, and, in fact, smiled and nodded at the man. No matter who the other person was, so long as he had not tried to harm him yet, Guo DaLu would always be very friendly. "I am surnamed Guo. My name is Guo DaLu – 'da' as in 'da fang' [generous, magnanimous] and 'lu' as in 'shang lu' [start a journey]."

The one-legged man spoke up coolly, "I did not ask for your esteemed name."

Guo DaLu grinned, "But the fact that we could come across one another in a place like this means we were brought together by fate."

One-legged man: "How do you know that it was by chance that we met here?"

Guo DaLu: "You mean, it was not for you?"

One-legged man: "No."

Guo DaLu: "Do you mean you specifically came here to find me?"

One-legged man: "Yes."

Guo DaLu: "Why would you want to find me?"

One-legged man: "To make you go back."

Guo DaLu: "Go back? Go back to where?"

One-legged man: "Wherever you came from is where you should go back to."

Guo DaLu blinked. "You do not want me to go to the Dragon King Temple?"

One-legged man: "Yes."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

One-legged man: "That is an ill-fated place. Disaster inevitably falls on whoever goes there."

"Thank you for your advice," Guo DaLu said with a smile, "but we do not know one another. Why are you so concerned for me?"

One-legged man: "You insist on going?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

One-legged man: "Fine. Strike me down first and then you may proceed by stepping over my body."

Sighing, Guo DaLu realized, "So it turns out that you actually came here specifically to fight me."

The one-legged man did not say anything else. With a wave of his arm, the lantern in his hand glided through the air and stabbed straight into a willow branch beside the road.

"Excellent technique," Guo DaLu could not help complimenting. "Just based on this display of skill alone, I may not be able to defeat you."

The one-legged man told him, "It is still not too late for you to go back."

Grinning again, Guo DaLu replied, "It's precisely because I may not be able to beat you that I am going to fight. If I am certain I am going to win, what fun would it be?"

The one-legged man nodded his head slowly. "Good," he said approvingly. "You've got guts. I never kill a person who has guts. At most, I will only chop off his two legs."

Guo DaLu laughed, "At most, I will only chop off your one leg because you only have one leg."

He had never been a bitter and spiteful person and usually would not be willing to say such bitter and spiteful words, but at that moment, he had realized that the pock-faced man, the hunchback, and this one-legged man were all in collusion and had arranged this trap for him to step into. Now, he had fallen into it, but he still did not even know what type of trap it was.

This battle was one where "the enemy is in the darkness and I am in the light; the enemy is many and I am few." The fight seemed to be lacking in fairness. There was not much of a chance for Guo DaLu, so even if he did say a few spiteful words, he could be forgiven.

At least, he had forgiven himself.

Sure enough, the one-legged man's anger flared. With a loud shout, the short staff in his hand came sweeping towards Guo DaLu, carrying with it a fierce wind.

Sure enough, the one-legged man's anger flared. With a loud shout, the short staff in his hand came sweeping towards Guo DaLu, carrying with it a fierce wind.

The short staff was at most three, four feet long, and there was at least two or three zhang [1 zhang = 3 1/3 metre (10

feet)] between him and Guo DaLu. However, the instant he waved his arm, the staff had already reached Guo DaLu's face.

The staff attack had come extremely rapidly. Guo DaLu was unarmed and had no way of warding it off. He could only dodge.

This one-legged man's moves flowed continuously with each one swifter than the previous. Guo DaLu was not able to clearly see the stances of this staff skill, but he knew that its origins were not insignificant. Of the highly skilled martial artists in jianghu, only two types of people would use a short staff: one was beggars, the other was monks.

For the most part, beggars generally belonged to the Beggar's Union, which was also commonly referred to as "Poor Guy's Union." The short staff they used was usually called a "dog beating stick." This name allegedly had been thought up by one of the former leaders of the union who had been surnamed Zha, but nobody had actually researched its real origins.

And so, the staff art that they used was also named "Dog Beating Stick", and its transformations were exquisitely ingenious and strangely complex. It had always been that not many people were able to truly master it.

The stances that this one-legged man used, though, were fiercely hard, powerful, and unstoppable, and as he executed them, there was nothing intricate at all about the variations in them. Guo DaLu may not have been very seasoned in the ways of jianghu, but he had heard others talk about Dog Beating Stick before. He could tell that this one-legged man was definitely not using Dog Beating Stick, and therefore, he could not be someone of the Beggar's Union either.

Guo DaLu's eyes twinkled and he unexpectedly spoke up with a laugh, "I know who you are; you can't hide the truth from me."

The one-legged man's staff suddenly slowed, and the muscles in his entire body seemed to stiffen slightly. Why was he startled when he heard this sentence? Did he have a secret that others could not know about and was afraid that people would figure out his whereabouts?

As soon as the one-legged man's attacks slowed, Guo DaLu sped up. His two fists shot out like wind, striking at the opening the one-legged man left. Now, even moreso, the one-legged man was not able execute his staff stances.

A battle between martial masters is sometimes like a game between famous chess experts – it only takes one wrong move for the entire game to be lost.

Guo DaLu suddenly unleashed three successive punches, aiming at the one-legged man's chest and stomach. By the time the man had executed a stance to defend and block, though, Guo DaLu had abruptly changed his move. With a wave of his arm, his hand came down on the bamboo hat on top of the one-legged man's head.

Of course, if he had wanted to actually hit his head, he would not have been able to, but that bamboo hat was wide and big. In addition, whenever a person fights, he will only think about protecting his own head. Who would actually concern himself with the hat on his head?

The instant the bamboo hat fell off, the colorless face of the one-legged man was revealed along with a bald head. On the top of his head, there were also nine round incense burn scars of a monk who has taken his vows.

Guo DaLu somersaulted into the air and withdrew back seven feet. "My guess was correct," he proclaimed loudly. "You really are a buddhist monk."

The one-legged man's complexion became even more wretched. With a sudden stomp of his foot, the short staff flew out of his hand and hit the lantern that was hanging from the willow branch, knocking it to the ground. All around, the sheet of blackness returned again. The one-legged man's outline seemed to flit, and then he had vanished into the darkness.

Guo DaLu actually found this rather peculiar. "What secret does this monk have that he does not want others to know about? Even if someone saw through that he is a monk, what is the big deal? Why is he so panicked, so much so that he is even more nervous than if someone had recognized that he is a wanted criminal?" Guo DaLu could not figure any of this out.

But right now, he had enough troubles already. Where could he find the time to think about other people's issues?

Since there was nobody obstructing his way anymore, he proceeded forward again. He walked and walked along. All of a sudden, in a place up ahead, lamplight miraculously flared up. The radiant light revealed a small temple.

Dragon King Temple. He had finally arrived.

He had arrived at Dragon King Temple, but who had lit the lamps inside? Why would that person suddenly light so many lamps in the temple?

Not only were the actions of those three people – the hunchbacked old man, the one-legged monk, plus the pock-faced man – extremely secretive and strange, their

backgrounds were also mysterious and difficult to guess. From their martial arts abilities, you could tell that they must be among the best of the first-class martial artists in jianghu, but yet no one had ever heard of them before. It was as if they did not even have names.

Seven lamps were lit in the temple, but there was not a single person inside. If the person had lit lamps so that Guo DaLu could find this place, why, then, would he also leave?

Guo DaLu gazed all about him, extremely relaxed, as if he was a tourist. In reality, in his heart, how could he not feel nervous? Naturally, the madman did not do all this as a joke. No one would waste all that effort and thought and spend so much money just to play a joke on someone.

So now, Guo DaLu could only wait for him to expose his own identity and reveal his motive. That instant was certain to be dangerous and extremely terrifying and perhaps would even be the moment that decided whether Guo DaLu would live or die.

Waiting has always been a very painful thing to have to do, let alone waiting when Guo DaLu did not even know what he was waiting for.

Guo DaLu had just heaved a sigh when a lamp on the altar extinguished suddenly. There was no wind inside. Why would a lamp that was burning perfectly fine all of sudden go out? Puckering his brow, he walked over and carefully examined it for a long while before discovering that the reason why this lamp had suddenly snuffed out was merely because its oil had dried up.

The lamp may have extinguished itself without any help, but beneath the altar, there seemed to be something moving

and shaking non-stop. Guo DaLu immediately retreated three steps. "Who is it?" he asked in a low voice.

There was no answer, but the object quivered even more fiercely so that ripples undulated through the cloth covering the altar.

All of a sudden, Guo DaLu dashed over and whipped up the cloth. He paused in surprise.

So late in the night, so desolate a place.

In this spooky, mysterious Dragon King Temple, underneath that worn, old altar was a sixteen or seventeen year old girl, beautiful as a spring flower.

In order to get to this place, Guo DaLu had come across many weird people and encountered many strange events. It could almost be said that he had risked his life for it. No matter how dangerous an ambush or how terrible an enemy was hidden beneath that altar, he still would not have found it strange. However, never in his dreams would he have thought that what he encountered would be a girl like this one.

She was so delicate and petite, so pitiable, and the clothes she wore were very thin. Her entire body was trembling uncontrollably, but it was not known whether it was from cold or from fright. Seeing Guo DaLu, she began shaking even harder.

Her arms were wrapped around her chest and her body pulled tightly into a ball. Dread filled those beautiful eyes and they also seemed to plead for mercy as, with great difficulty, she stammered out a few words: "I beg you... Please let me go."

Guo DaLu was still stunned as he stood there. A long time passed before he could finally speak. "Who are you? What are you doing in a place like this?"

The young girl's lips were pale as she continued to quaver, "I beg you... Please let me go." She was so terrified it was as if her soul had flown away. Besides these two phrases, she was not able to say anything else.

With a sigh, Guo DaLu said, "You do not need to beg me. I did not come here to harm you."

The young girl stared at him, and only after quite a while did she slowly manage to recover her composure. "You... you mean you are not that person?"

Guo DaLu: "Which person?"

Young girl: "The person who kidnapped me here."

Guo DaLu answered with a wry smile, "Of course not. Don't you even know yourself who kidnapped you to this place?"

Nibbling on her lip, the girl said, "I... I never saw him."

Guo DaLu: "Well then, how did you get here?"

The young girl's eyes grew red, as if she was ready to cry at any moment.

Guo DaLu hurriedly spoke up again, "I told you already that I am not going to hurt you, so you have no need to be afraid now. Just say it slowly. It doesn't matter." It would have been better if he had not tried to console her. As soon as he did, the young girl actually covered her face and began sobbing uncontrollably.

Guo DaLu was again at a loss for what he should do. To tell a sixteen or seventeen year old girl to have a good hard cry is something that any man can do successfully. But to be able to successfully tell her to stop crying requires a man who is rich in experience. In this aspect, Guo DaLu's experience was not enough. And so, he could only watch from off to the side.

He did not know how much time elapsed, but at last, with sniffles and hiccoughs, the sounds of her weeping finally died out. Only then could Guo DaLu breathe out in relief. "Do you not know yourself how you got here?" he asked gently.

The young girl was still covering her face with her hands. "I had been asleep. Afterward, when I suddenly awakened, I was already here."

Guo DaLu: "When you woke up, was there no one else here?"

Young girl: "This place is so dark and cold. I really was terribly frightened. Luckily, I felt a flint on the table..." Sure enough, on the altar was a flint and knife set.

Guo DaLu: "So you lit all the lamps in this place?"

The young girl nodded her head.

At least Guo DaLu understood this one thing now, but he still could not help inquiring, "Since there was no one here just now, why didn't you seize that opportunity to escape?"

Young girl: "I had originally wanted to try and escape, but once I step out the door, it will be even darker and colder outside and I... I did not even dare take one step out."

Up until this point, her body had still been trembling gently but at least her words were clear now. A young maiden,

whose foot never even stepped beyond the doorway of her home, suddenly awakened to find herself in a deserted temple but still managed not to grow crazy with fright – this was already a miracle.

Guo DaLu gazed at her with eyes full of compassion. Her face was still hidden behind her hands, but she was starting to peep out at Guo DaLu through the spaces between her fingers. Guo DaLu really did not look like a bad person – not only did he not look like one, he wasn't one.

He had wanted to help her stand up from beneath the table, but just as he stretched out his hand, he immediately retracted it again. Although she appeared petite and delicate, her body was already maturely developed. The clothes she wore really were pitifully thin. Since her hands were already covering her face, they could not be used to cover up other places on her body.

The light was still very bright.

Not only did Guo DaLu dare not stretch out his hand, he did not even allow himself to look.

At that instant, another light went out. The third lamp extinguished even more quickly. It seemed that right from the start, the oil in the lamps had already been nearly exhausted. All of a sudden, all seven lamps were snuffed out. With a squeal of fear, the girl threw herself into Guo DaLu's arms.

With a squeal of fear, the girl threw herself into Guo DaLu's arms.

Guo DaLu suddenly found the soft flesh and warm fragrance of a beauty in his embrace, and his heart started beating twice as fast. He immediately warned himself, "You are a

man, not an animal. You must not take advantage of other people's times of difficulty.

You must not do that sort of thing. Not only must you not do it, you are not even allowed to think about it; otherwise, you have not just wronged yourself but you will have wronged Yan Qi too." He reminded himself this in his heart, sincerely wanting to restrain himself. However, there are many parts on a human body that you just cannot control.

The first part was his nose.

The delicate fragrance of a virgin and the sweet scent of her hair flooded him in waves with every breath and bored into his heart.

Plus that warm, soft feeling that was in his embrace.

Plus that god-awful darkness.

"Do not take advantage of a dark room." These words are so simple to say, but only someone who has personally experienced this situation is able to understand how difficult it actually is to do. Guo DaLu was not a saint, nor was he a god. If one was to say that at this very moment, he was able to completely keep his focus, then that would be a lie.

But there was a powerful force that enabled him to control himself. This power was neither a god or anything else but rather, was the sincerity and purity of the feelings that he had for Yan Qi.

He did not push away the young girl. He did not have the heart to. The way this young girl was curled up in his embrace was like a little pigeon that had suffered through countless torments and frights and finally, amid a windy and rain-filled sky, had found a safe place to perch and rest. Guo

DaLu lightly hugged her shoulders and said in a soothing voice, "You have no need to be afraid. I will take you back."

Young girl: "Really?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course, and in fact, I can take you back right now."

Young girl: "But... you came here in the middle of the night. It must have been for very important matters. How can you set aside your own things just to take me back?"

Guo DaLu gave an inward sigh. Reaching this place had not been easy for him, and to have him just walk away from it was not something he was really willing to do. Perhaps that pock-faced man would be arriving momentarily; perhaps he would have information about Yan Qi shortly.

However, there was no room for choice for him. For a man who is alive in the world, not only must he adhere to "things a man cannot do", but he should also do the "things a man must do." The choices that need to be made in the meantime will naturally be very difficult, and moreover, not only will they require courage but also self-confidence to make them.

He patted the girl on the shoulder again. "It is going to be light very soon. If your parents discover that you are missing, they are going to be very worried. If other people find out that you did not go home for an entire night, you don't even know how much gossip there will be. You are still young now and may not know yet how scary that gossip can be, but I know." Sometimes, that type of gossip may not only ruin a person's reputation, it could even ruin her life.

As his thoughts lead to this point, Guo DaLu's resolve became even firmer and he declared determinedly, "And so,

I must take you back now.”

The young girl suddenly hugged him tightly. After quite some time, she finally softly said, “You truly are a good person. I have never before seen anyone as good as you.”

“My house is in that lane up ahead, the third one on the right. It is the one with a willow tree growing in front.”

It was very peaceful inside the lane. In the east, the light of early dawn was just starting to show and it shone upon the dew on the bluestone tiles.

“They must not have realized yet that you are missing,” Guo DaLu observed in a quiet voice. “Are you able to sneak back inside without them knowing?”

The young girl nodded. “I can go in through the back door. My room is on that side.”

Guo DaLu advised, “It would be best if you changed the room that you sleep in and have an elderly maidservant with you.” He paused briefly in thought, then added, “These next couple of nights, I will stay nearby at all times and come to check on you. Perhaps I may even be able to help you find out who was the one who kidnapped you.” The early dawn light in the east shone on his face and on his beads of sweat, which seemed as bright and sparkling as the dewdrops. His face also seemed to be glowing.

The young girl lifted her head to gaze up intently at him. “Why haven’t you asked what my name is?” she asked unexpectedly. “Do you really never want to see me again?”

With a forced chuckle, Guo DaLu answered gently, “I am a wanderer and also someone who does as he pleases. If I have interactions with you, people will also gossip about it behind your back.”

Young girl: "I'm not afraid of that."

Guo DaLu: "But I am afraid."

She blinked at him. "What are you afraid of?"

Guo DaLu did not give her a reply, only patted her shoulder again and told her, "In the future, you will know what it is I am afraid of. Right now, though, you should be good and go back to your room and have a good sleep. It would best for you if you are able to completely erase this whole incident from your memory."

The young girl had lowered her head. After a long time, she finally said softly, "When you walk out of this lane, it will be good if you turned right."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

She did not give him an answer to his question either. Raising her head suddenly, she gave a charming smile. "You truly are a good person. Good people will never be lonely."

The morning fog had risen.

Early morning at the beginning of summer. There was still a slight chill in the air.

Guo DaLu's heart, though, was warm because he knew he had not wronged or let anyone down – he had not let down those friends of his who were good to him, nor had he let himself down. That is not an easy feat to achieve for anyone, no matter whom it may be.

He lifted his head to the sky, gave a big stretch, and exhaled a lengthy breath. "This day was very long." Nearly

everything that had occurred this day was completely beyond what he had foreseen.

That mysterious pock-faced man, that hunchbacked old man who had vanished into the darkness, that one-legged monk with the extremely high martial arts and secretive background, and also that pitiable and lovable young girl – the appearance of these people were also all beyond what he had expected.

He had encountered many dangers and been angered and frustrated, and still he had not been able to obtain any information regarding Yan Qi. But he had reaped some good already. He had not been hoping for any sort of repayment from people when he did what he did, but it had already caused his heart to be flooded with warmth and happiness.

Good people will never be lonely. One who does good deeds will also be blessed.

“When you walk out of this lane, it will be good if you turned right.” Guo DaLu did not know what this was about, but he still did turn to the right.

He immediately discovered something very strange.

End of Chapter 42

Chapter 43 - The Strange Person in the Secret House

Early hours before dawn. The morning fog had just risen up from the roadway made of cobblestone. The road was very narrow.

As Guo DaLu turned past the lane and to the right, he saw a very familiar-looking door. What that meant was he had once gone through this door before. But in this city, he practically did not know a single person here and did not even have a single household that he was acquainted with. He immediately recalled that this door was the same door he had barged into when he was pursuing the pock-faced man in the daytime.

There were no lamps lit inside now. Was that sallow, emaciated-looking husband doing the deed that made him sallow and emaciated?

Guo DaLu had originally intended on coming to this place during the night to investigate and see if the pock-faced man would show up there. Now, though, he had changed his mind.

He continued forward and turned right again.

This particular lane was neatly lined with bluestone slabs and appeared to be far cleaner and tidier than the other lanes. It was already into the small hours, yet several lights were still lit inside. He saw the characters on two of the lanterns, and immediately, his eyes shone.

“Liu Chun Yuan*.”

So, it turns out that MeiLan guniang's love nest [original xiang chao; literally 'fragrant nest'; gen. a more derogatory term] was in this lane. Unfortunately, now was not the time to go visit a brothel. MeiLan guniang's jade-like arm perhaps was being used as someone else's pillow right then. Even if Guo DaLu was a philanderer, he could not charge in there now and spoil someone else's fun.

But there seemed to be a very particular feeling in his heart, almost like the feeling a poet gets right before the perfect line of a verse has come to him.

Picking up his speed, he turned right again. He was now on a main street. He walked along the street for another ten steps or so and then, he saw that grain shop as well as Hui Bin Liu's gold-lettered shopsign diagonally across the way.

A few stone blocks were set along the side of the street. Guo DaLu sat himself down on one to ponder.

Let's say that the line of houses that made up the household the young girl lived in was the first line. The rooms of that husband and wife couple would be the second line. The rooms that made up Liu Chun Yuan would be considered the third line. And the grain shop would of course be the fourth line. Within each of these four lines of houses was someone who somehow had connections to the pock-faced man.

If the pock-faced man had not wanted him to go to the Dragon King Temple, how could he have encountered the young girl? Was this coincidence? Or was it an intentional arrangement? Was it because she knew some sort of secret but could not tell him so she deliberately used this way to drop him a hint?

What secret could she know? Had she deliberately hidden beneath the table and deliberately allowed Guo DaLu to

discover her presence? Could this all have been arranged by the pock-faced man ahead of time? What would his motive for doing that be?

Guo DaLu rose to his feet, retraced his steps, and then walked back along the same route once again.

These four lines of houses formed a quadrilateral with sides of unequal length. In any city's streets, the line of houses in front always pressed up against the line directly behind it. However, between the first and third lines of houses here, there was actually a very wide distance. It was the same for the second and fourth ones as well. Therefore, in the middle of these four lines of houses, there must be an open space.

Guo DaLu's heart leapt suddenly. Was there some sort of special reason that these four lines of houses were deliberately constructed in this way? There was only one way to find out the answer to this question.

Guo DaLu soared up onto the roof of the grain shop.

The room at the front of the grain shop was the front sales counter. In the back, there was also a courtyard. The rooms on either side of the courtyard appeared to be the bedrooms of the master of the household, and the one at the back was the storeroom for the grains. There should have been no other rooms beyond that.

Guo DaLu was already on the roof of that back storeroom, and he instantly saw that, sure enough, there was another house in the middle of the four lines of houses. The four households were like four walls, surrounding that house in the center so that it neither had an exit or a front entrance. Who in the world would actually build their home in this sort of place?

If Guo DaLu flew over the roof of that house, he would be on the husband-wife couple's property, or the second line of houses. Unless one was paying particular attention, anyone would think that this house was joined to one of the other properties. Even if there was a nightwalker passing over on the roof, that person still would definitely not notice what was unusual about this house.

But Guo DaLu had discovered it now.

Could it be that the master of this house was the pock-faced man? Naturally, to build this house in a place like this must have required a lot of effort and a very large price, but why would he do that? Could he be like the one-legged monk and have a secret that could not be divulged to anyone?

Or perhaps he was trying to elude the pursuit of a very powerful enemy and so he needed to build such a house to hide away in? This house was indeed much more concealed than any other place Guo DaLu had seen before, but why did he seem to deliberately, yet not quite deliberately, allow Guo DaLu to discover this secret? If he had not exposed a trail of clues, Guo DaLu would definitely not have been able to find this place.

Guo DaLu pondered over this. The more he thought about it, the more he found this whole matter to be extremely mysterious and complicated. In order to find out the answer to everything, there was only one thing that could be done.

He jumped down.

Between the storeroom of the grainshop and this house, there was actually another wall. On the inside of this wall was a very long and narrow courtyard. The spring flowers had not withered away yet, and they gave off a delicate fragrance amidst the morning mist. Beyond the courtyard

was a long gallery, and the light of the early morning was shining upon its spotless floor.

All around, it was very quiet. Not a sound could be heard. Even the wind could not blow into this place. It was completely isolated from all the worries, grudges, joys, and sorrows of human society. Only someone who had experienced the rise and falls of life and seen beyond the ways of the world and whose heart was like still water could live in a place like this – was worthy of living in a place like this.

The pock-faced man did not appear to be such a person. Could Guo DaLu have been mistaken? His speculations were wrong? He nearly wanted to retreat out of there.

But at that instant, he saw a person step out quietly from the very end of the gallery. It was a young girl, beautiful as a spring flower, dressed in a snow-white gown, wearing no rouge or powder and without shoes, only a pair of white stockings on her feet, as if for fear that the sound of her footsteps would shatter this peaceful quiet that allowed people to forget about worldly things.

In her hands, she carried a “sunshine after the rain” porcelain [phrase used to describe the unique lustre of this famous porcelain] dish as she stepped quietly through the gallery. If she had not suddenly turned around to cast a glance in Guo DaLu’s direction, Guo DaLu nearly did not recognize her.

If she had not suddenly turned around to cast a glance in Guo DaLu’s direction, Guo DaLu nearly did not recognize her.

This gentle, quiet, simple girl astonishingly was MeiLan guniang, the girl who, in the daytime, had adorned herself up so that she looked like a demoness.

She clearly should have seen Guo DaLu when she turned back to look, but yet she appeared as if she had not noticed anything. Lowering her head, she proceeded forward again silently.

Guo DaLu, though, nearly could not contain himself and wanted to shout. However, even Guo DaLu did not dare cry out in such a place, did not wish to disturb the tranquility. He could only stand there in a daze.

MeiLan had gently pushed open the door and quietly stepped inside. There was still no sound inside the house, nothing astir. Clearly, this was a forbidden place that did not allow outsiders to enter, yet Guo DaLu was plainly standing there and no one was paying him any attention, as if he simply did not exist.

What sort of people actually lived here? What was it that they intended to do to him?

Guo DaLu stared blankly for a long time. All of a sudden, with large strides, he stepped into the gallery. Regardless of whether it was a person or a ghost in that room, for good or for bad, he should at least have a look.

But as his foot stepped up into the gallery, he retracted it again. He had noticed the mud on his feet. The gallery was as bright and shiny as a mirror. To step onto it with his dirty pair of feet was something even he could not bring himself to do and was a little embarrassed to do. He took off his muddy shoes. His socks could still be considered clean, although they did have a bit of a stench, but he could not worry about such things at the moment.

And so, he walked over and shoved open that door.

Surprisingly, the room was empty. There was nothing inside – no bed, no tables and chairs, no decorations, and not a single speck of dust. Spread out on the ground was a very thick straw mat, and on top of that mat was a set of snow-white bedding. A person was lying inside the covers. The scent of medicinal herbs permeated through the room. It was apparent that person had a grave illness.

Guo DaLu did not see the person's face because right then, a white-dressed girl with long hair brushing past her shoulders was kneeling by his side, slowly feeding him the bowl of medicine that MeiLan had brought in. Guo DaLu could not see the girl's face either as her back was facing him.

Only MeiLan's face was turned in his direction. She had clearly seen him push open the door, but there still was not a trace of expression on her face. It was as if she simply did not view him as a living human being. Guo DaLu wished he could dart over there, grab her by the hair, and ask her whether her eyes were actually on the top of her head.

This room, though, was just too quiet, so quiet that it seemed like a temple and gave people a sense of sacred solemnness that should not be desecrated. Once again, Guo DaLu nearly wanted to step back out of there. The person he was looking for was not there anyway, and plus, this type of atmosphere was precisely the type that he could not bear.

Who would have thought that, right at that moment, the girl with long hair covering her shoulders would suddenly speak up in a quiet tone? "Hurry in. Close the door. Don't let the wind blow in here." Listening to her tone of voice, it sounded as if she had known all along that Guo DaLu would come and also seemed to treat Guo DaLu like he was someone in her family.

Guo DaLu's heart nearly stopped beating. That was clearly the sound of Yan Qi's voice. Could this long-haired, white-dressed girl be Yan Qi?

The door was closed now.

Guo DaLu stood there like a wooden figure, his eyes wide as he stared at the white-dressed girl. All he could see was her back. It was thin and slender and her deep black hair hung loosely like strands of rain on her shoulders. Guo DaLu's hands were tightly clenched, his lips dry, and his heart beating as if it wanted to jump out of his throat. He really wished he could rush over there, grab her by the shoulders, and have her turn her face toward him. No one would truly be able to comprehend how much he longed to see her face.

But he was only able to stand there like a wooden figurine. Because he did not dare – did not dare defile this sacred solemnness and, even moreso, did not dare disrespect her.

The sick man had at last finished drinking his medicine and lay down. Guo DaLu could finally see his head of white hair, but he still had not seen his face yet. Kneeling beside him, she gently set down the bowl and pulled up the bedquilt over him, seeming to be very close and treating him with respect and love and consideration. If Guo DaLu had not seen his head full of white hair, he practically would not have been able to restrain his jealousy.

Who was this old man? Why would she be so considerate and caring to him?

He could hear the old man cough lightly before, after a long while, he spoke unexpectedly, "Has he arrived already?"

The white-dressed girl nodded.

The old man ordered, "Tell him to come over." Even though his voice was old and feeble, it still carried an indescribably intimidating strength.

At last, the white-dressed girl slowly turned her head around. At last, Guo DaLu saw her face.

In that instant, all things and creatures in the universe seemed to suddenly perish and stop.

"Yan Qi... Yan Qi..." Guo DaLu called out in his heart. Burning tears wanted to spill out from his eyes. There was no sound accompanying this cry of his heart, but she seemed to have heard it – only she could hear it. Beads of tears brimmed in her eyes also.

He had experienced innumerable hardships, countless torments, and numerous trials, and now, he could finally see her again. How could you tell him that he should not shed tears? How would you know whether his tears were from sadness or happiness? In the end, he managed to hold them back. Besides her, he was unwilling to have anyone see him cry.

But he was not able to stop himself from looking at her face. It was no longer that face from before which had held a bit of feigned anger and a bit of mischievousness. Now, all that remained on that face was genuine love. Nor was it the face in the past that, although very filthy, had been filled with a healthy, joyful glow. Now, this face was pale and weary and so beautiful it could break someone's heart.

It was apparent that she, too, had endured countless torments and immeasurable pain. The one thing that had not changed was her eyes. Her eyes were just as bright and still carried that strength. But why was her head lowered?

Could it be that she had not been able to stop her tears from flowing?

The old man coughed lightly once again. She finally wiped away her tears quietly, raised her head, and, beckoning to Guo DaLu with her hand, said, "Come over."

Guo DaLu's eyes were still fixed on her face, looking like he had been hypnotized by some sort of spell as, step by step, he walked over. Her head lowered again and her cheeks seemed to grow pink. This same rosy tint had coloured her cheeks in the past, but Guo DaLu had never really paid attention to it. Men will sometimes blush too. Right then, Guo DaLu wished he could box his own ears ten hard times. He really could not understand how he could have been so stupid and how could he have not seen that she was a woman.

With a sigh, the old man instructed, "Come a little closer. Let me take a look at you."

Guo DaLu did not hear him. At the moment, aside from her, he was not able to hear what anyone said.

Yan Qi was nibbling on her lip. "Did you hear what my Papa said?" she chided.

Guo DaLu was taken aback by this. "He... this respected senior [orig. laorenjia; polite address for an old man/woman] is your father?"

Yan Qi nodded.

Guo DaLu immediately walked over closer. He could be disrespectful to anyone, be unhearing to anyone's words, but of course Yan Qi's father would be an exception.

The old man saw him. He also saw the old man.

He paused once again in astonishment.

The world has many types of people, and so, there are also many types of faces. Some faces are long, some are round, some are handsome. Some faces are bright and cheerful and they illuminate other people, while some forever look as if someone owes them 30,000 liang and has not paid them back yet. Guo DaLu had seen many people and had looked at many faces.

But he had never seen a face like this one!

Strictly speaking, this could no longer be considered a human face but rather, it was a living skull. All that was left of that long and square face was a layer of skin wrapped around bone. It seemed as if it had absolutely no blood or flesh. Yet on each side of that blade scar, blood and flesh jutted up.

The most frightful thing was that scar!

Two blade scars had been sliced across his face so that they formed a cross shape. The one on the left side cut across his eye, then across his nose all the way to the corner of his mouth. The one on the right started from his right cheek and sliced over the bridge of his nose to the base of his ear. As a result, one was not able to distinguish the shape of the nose on this face anymore.

All that was left was a single eye – a half-closed eye. By now, the scar from that wound had healed over long ago, left there for an indeterminate number of years. The flesh that protruded up on either sides of the scar, though, was still deep red, like the color of fresh blood. Against his gaunt,

pale face, that blood-red cross-shaped scar appeared as if it was aflame, like the mark of an evil spirit from hell.

This old man looked as if he did live in hell.

Even Guo DaLu's breathing nearly stopped. He could not bear, and did not dare, to look at that face, but yet he could not avoid it either. In fact, he could not allow himself to show even the slightest repulsion or fear because this old man was Yan Qi's father.

The old man was looking at him right then with that half-closed eye. After a lengthy moment, he asked slowly, "You are Guo DaLu?"

"Yes." Guo DaLu answered.

Old man: "You are my daughter's good friend?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Old man: "You think that my face is very ugly and very frightening?"

Guo DaLu was silent for a long while before eventually replying, "Yes."

The old man also grew quiet for quite some time. Suddenly, from his throat, there was the sound of a short laugh. "No wonder my daughter says you are an honest and forthright person. It would appear that you really are."

Guo DaLu cast a glance in Yan Qi's direction. Yan Qi's head still hung low. A smile could also be seen on MeiLan's face. Lowering his head as well, Guo DaLu admitted, "Sometimes, I am not all that honest." These were also very honest words. He had suddenly discovered that being truthful in front of this old man was a very good approach.

Sure enough, the old man gave a slight nod of approval. "True. Anyone who is dishonest has no hopes of coming here. An overly honest person, though, also would never be able to find this place." With an unexpected sigh filled with emotion, he added, "That you could actually arrive here was not easy feat... truly not easy."

As Guo DaLu heard these words in his ear, he felt a sudden twinge in his heart. Why did Yan Qi allow him to go through so many torments? Why did she want him to have to search so agonizingly?

Although the old man's eye was half-closed, he seemed as if he had seen into Guo DaLu's heart as he instructed, "Tell them to come in."

MeiLan responded, "Yes." She walked over very softly and very quietly opened another door.

Three people noiselessly walked in from the other side of the door. The first person was the pock-faced man. He had now changed into a long, snow-white robe. The instant he entered the room, he stood in a corner with his hands hanging down deferentially, showing both awe and respect, like a slave who has seen his master. Following in behind him was of course the hunchback.

The third person was that one-legged monk. All three were dressed in the same white robe, and their manner all showed the same respect for the old man. The three of them stood with their heads lowered, not even glancing once at Guo DaLu.

The old man spoke, "I believe you know each other."

The three people gave a nod of their heads in unison.

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from piping up, “They may know me, but I do not know them.”

Sighing, the old man replied, “Indeed, there are not many young people nowadays who would recognize them, but perhaps you would have heard their names.”

Guo DaLu: “Oh?”

Old man: “You had exchanged blows with Lan Kun. Were you not able to identify his martial art?”

Guo DaLu: “Lan Kun?”

Old man: “Lan Kun is his secular name. Ever since he became a monk at Shaolin, others only know him as Tie Song.”

This one-legged monk actually belonged to the sect of Shaolin! Only Shaolin’s “Wind and Thunder Demon Subduing Staff” could have that sort of astonishing might. A shocked expression came over Guo DaLu’s face as he exclaimed, “Could it be that he is the one who charged into Xingxiuhai¹⁸ alone, who with ‘one staff subdued ten demons’ – ‘Golden Arhat’ Tie Song Dashi [dashi is a courtesy title for a Buddhist monk]?”

Old man: “Correct. It is he.”

Guo DaLu could not speak. This Golden Arhat was one of the people he had idolized in his youth. When he was seven or eight years old, he had already heard this name. Later, he heard someone say that this person had passed away. Who would have thought that he had actually gone into seclusion here?

Old man: “ ‘Beyond the Sky Roaming Dragon Divine Hunchback.’ I would think that you have heard this name before as well.”

Guo DaLu was taken aback once again. It turns out that this hunchback was actually the most famous lightness kung fu master of the past. No wonder, then, that he had only turned his head away and then even that person’s shadow could not be seen.

Old man: “ ‘Beyond the Sky Roaming Dragon Divine Hunchback’ and ‘Thousand Changes, Ten Thousand Transformations Wise Strategist’ – these two people have always been equal in fame.”

Stunned, Guo DaLu looked over at the pock-faced man and blurted, “Could he be Wise Strategist, Mr. Yuan Da?”

Old man: “So you know of him also.”

Guo DaLu stood there in a daze, unable to even exhale for a very long time. Twenty years ago, these three people had all been arrogant martial arts masters of jianghu with illustrious reputations. According to the legends of jianghu, these three had all died already.

No one would have thought that these three people would be hiding here, and furthermore, seemed to have become this sickly old man’s servant and subordinate.

No one would have thought that these three people would be hiding here, and furthermore, seemed to have become this sickly old man’s servant and subordinate.

As Guo DaLu’s thoughts reached this point, his heart was struck with shock again. Even supreme martial arts masters like Golden Arhat or Divine Hunchback had become this old man’s servant and moreover, showed such veneration and

respect toward him. What sort of personage could this old man be? Guo DaLu really could not figure it out.

Even if the former abbot of Shaolin, Tie Mei, came back to life, Golden Arhat still would not show such reverence. Even if the world's most famous hero of the past was reborn, the Divine Hunchback and the Wise Strategist would not willingly be his servant. What power did this old man have that these three people would obey and respect him in such a way?

"They put you through quite a bit of suffering today," the old man said. "Are you feeling rather displeased with them in your heart?"

Guo Dalu wanted to shake his head, but he did not. Forcing a smile, he admitted, "A little bit."

Old man: "Do you think what they did was very bizarre?"

Guo DaLu: "A little bit, too... well, not just a little bit."

Old man: "You used every possible means to try and find this place. For what reason?"

With a glance over at Yan Qi again, Guo DaLu answered haltingly, "To find her."

"Why do you want to find her?" the old man interrogated. It seemed that whenever he spoke, he was always questioning, and what's more, the manner in which he asked was overbearing and aggressive, not giving others the slightest bit of leeway.

Guo DaLu lowered his eyes, and he seemed bashful and uneasy. But at this moment, Yan Qi suddenly lifted up her head and gazed at him with those eyes that were clear as the autumn waters. Courage and confidence immediately

flooded Guo DaLu's heart and, raising his head, he declared loudly, "Because I like her and I want to be with her forever." This was an open and honorable thing, and the open and upright manner that he was using demonstrated his sincerity and forthrightness.

The old man's tone became even more stern as, articulating each word, he demanded, "Do you want to take her as your wife?"

Guo DaLu did not even need to consider. "Yes."

"And you will never regret it?" the old man pressed.

Guo DaLu repeated, "Never regret."

The old man's half-closed eye suddenly flew open. Like a bolt of lightning, light seemed to shoot out from that eye. Guo DaLu had never before seen such a threatening and terrible eye. However, he did not try to avoid its stare because he knew this was an important moment and because in his heart, he had no misgivings and his conscience was clear.

The old man stared forcefully at him and his voice was stern as he questioned, "But do you know who I am?"

Guo DaLu shook his head. This question was precisely the same one he had been suppressing in his heart for a long time and had been longing to ask.

Old man: "You see the cross-shaped sword scar on my face and you still do not know who I am?"

A shudder of fear suddenly seized Guo DaLu's heart, and his entire body was nearly shaken by this.

Cross-shaped sword wound! Fierce Crucifix Sword! The only person who had ever escaped with his life from beneath the Fierce Crucifix Sword was NanGong Chou! Could this gravely ill old man be the real NanGong Chou?!

All Guo DaLu could sense was his head spinning dizzily. He had never before thought that the one with the most notorious reputation, the number one evil person in jianghu, NanGong Chou, was actually Yan Qi's father. No wonder Yan Qi had been certain that that black-clothed man was definitely not NanGong Chou. And that sword that had stabbed through the wall and into the black-clothed man's heart had actually been Yan Qi's doing.

It was evident now that she had did it because she hated this person who had posed as her father and, therefore, did not hesitate to kill him in order to protect her father's reputation. No wonder she was never willing to reveal her background and seemed to have many secrets that she could not say.

The reason why, from the very beginning, she had not been willing to disclose to Guo DaLu that she was a girl must have been because she was ashamed of her family background and was afraid that once Guo DaLu knew about it, his feelings for her would change. Hence, she had to wait until right before they were facing death before she was willing to say it. And that was why she had run away.

These things that had seemed as if they forever would not be explained all finally had an answer. But Guo DaLu nearly could not believe it.

The room was even quieter. Everyone's eyes were fixed intently on Guo DaLu, except Yan Qi, who had lowered her head again. She seemed as if she did not dare look at Guo

DaLu again. She feared that Guo DaLu's answer would break her heart.

It was not known how much time elapsed before the old man finally asked slowly, "Now you know who I am?"

"Yes," Guo DaLu replied.

Old man: "If you change your mind now, it is still not too late."

Guo DaLu: "It is too late now."

Old man: "Why?"

"Because there is nothing in the world that can change the feelings I have for her. Even I, myself, am unable to." His voice was so resolute, so sincere. He turned his head to look into Yan Qi's eyes. Yan Qi could not help lifting her head to gaze back at him. Tears could be seen in her eyes, but they were now tears of joy as well as tears of gratitude. Even MeiLan's eyes seemed to have moistened slightly.

However, the old man's lightning-like stare was still on Guo DaLu. "You are still willing to take her as your wife?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

Old man: "You are willing to be the husband of NanGong Chou's daughter?"

Guo DaLu: "Yes."

The old man's stare suddenly softened, like ice melting in the spring water, and he murmured, "Good. You really are a good child..... Yan'er truly was not wrong about you." Slowly, he lowered the lid of his eye again and, with each

word spoken clearly, said, “Now, I can set my mind at ease and entrust her to you. Now, she is your wife.”

End of Chapter 43

Chapter 44 - Things of the Past

Wedding night [orig dong fang; literally 'cave chamber' and also refers to the nuptial room].

How many unmarried youth in this world are fantasizing about their wedding night, that beautifully romantic setting? And how many people in their old age are recalling the sweetness and warmth of that day in their newlyweds' room?

Fantasies and recollections forever are beautiful.

In reality, the wedding night in that newlywed's room is usually not as sweet and warm as the one in the memories, and the setting is never near as beautiful as the one in the fantasies.

Some people who think they are very intelligent often describe the nuptial room to be like a grave and will even say that the noises that come from that room will sometimes sound like that of a slaughterhouse.

Obviously, the newlyweds' room is not a grave or a slaughterhouse. Well then, what is it like in that newlyweds' room?

The nuptial room is usually not a very warm room. Everywhere there are bright colors, and all around there is the scent of paint in addition to the smell of alcohol left behind by the guests who had come to offer their congratulations. The person who is able to stay in that room for one or two shi chen [1 shi chen = 2 hours] and not vomit must have a very uniquely made nose and stomach.

Of course, inside that newlyweds' room, there is a man and a woman. These two people usually do not know each other all that well, and so, they usually do not have much to say to one another. Therefore, even if outside, things are so noisy they could overturn the heavens, it is usually very calm inside the newlyweds' room.

Though the guests are going all out as they eat and drink away, as if they need to get their money's worth, the groom and bride usually are hungry on their empty stomachs. This should have been their wedding night, but the day seemed as if it had been lived for other people.

The red cloth that had been covering Yan Qi's face had been raised now. Her head was lowered as she sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at her red embroidered shoes. Guo DaLu was sitting far away on a chair by the small round table, and he seemed to be staring off blankly also.

She did not dare look at him; he, too, did not dare look at her. If he had had some wine to drink, he may have relaxed a little, but what was ironic was he had actually not had anything to drink that day. It seems that any time a groom wants to drink some wine, there will always immediately be some "kind-hearted people" who go over to stop him, scrambling to drink it for him.

The two had been very good friends to begin with, and they should have had many things to say to each other everyday. But the instant they became husband and wife, it seemed as if they were no longer friends. The two of them had suddenly become distant with each other and very self-conscious. So, both were embarrassed to speak first.

Guo DaLu had thought that he would be able to handle this very well, but the instant he entered into the wedding chamber, he suddenly discovered that he had turned into an

idiot. He really was not used to situations like this. He had originally wanted to walk over and sit beside Yan Qi, but for some reason, his two legs had grown weak and he could not even stand. And then, he did not know how much time had passed, but when all he could feel was his neck starting to stiffen –

“I need to sleep,” Yan Qi suddenly spoke. When she said she was going to sleep, she really did go to sleep. Without even taking off her shoes, she fell back onto the bed, yanked up the red silk covers embroidered with two mandarin ducks frolicking in the water, and wrapped herself in it tightly. She turned to face the wall, her body curled up so that she looked like a dried shrimp.

Guo DaLu was gnawing on his lip as he watched her. A smile gradually began to twinkle in his eyes. “Why aren’t you telling me to get out today?”

Yan Qi paid no attention to him, appearing to be asleep.

“Aren’t you unable to fall asleep when there are other people in your room?” Guo DaLu chuckled.

Yan Qi had wanted to ignore him, but yet, was unable to resist retorting, “If you would just talk a little less, I will be able to sleep.”

Batting his eyes, Guo DaLu inquired again in a drawn out voice, “With me in the room, you are still able to sleep?”

She nibbled on her lip and answered softly, “You... you are not ‘other people.’ ”

“If I am not ‘other people’, then who am I?” Guo DaLu pressed.

A “pfft” suddenly escaped from Yan Qi’s lips, and she giggled, “You are a big-headed ghost.”

“Weird; so weird,” Guo DaLu sighed unexpectedly. “Why would you marry me, this big-headed ghost? I seem to recall you once saying that, even if every other man in the world had died off, you still would not marry me.”

Flipping back over abruptly, Yan Qi grabbed a pillow and tossed it forcefully at Guo DaLu. Her face was so red it looked like a ripe apple that had just been freshly picked.

The pillow came flying back, bringing along Guo DaLu as he soared back with it.

Blushing furiously, Yan Qi stammered, “What... what... what do you want to do?”

“I want to bite you.”

It was not known when, but the pink curtains had been let down.

If someone must say that the sounds that come from a newlyweds’ room are like those in a slaughterhouse, then this particular slaughterhouse must have been used to kill mosquitoes. Their voices were also like the humming of mosquitoes.

Guo DaLu seemed to be saying softly, “Weird. Really weird.”

Yan Qi: “What’s weird this time?”

Guo DaLu: “Why isn’t your body smelly at all?”

All that could be heard, then, was a “smack!”, as if someone was slapping a mosquito. And then, each successive slap got lighter and lighter, lighter and lighter.....

The sky would be light soon.

Inside that curtain, things had just quieted down. Another long while passed and then Guo DaLu's voice could be heard as it said quietly, "Do you know what I'm thinking about right now?"

Yan Qi: "Mm." Her voice was like the twittering of a sparrow. No one would be able to hear very clearly what she was saying.

Guo DaLu: "I have been thinking about a lot of very strange matters, but what I am actually thinking the most about is a nice pork shank, roasted until it's red and tender."

A "pfft" slipped from Yan Qi and she giggled, "Can't you say that you are thinking about me?"

Guo DaLu: "Nope. Cannot."

Yan Qi: "You cannot?"

"Because I'm scared I'll swallow you in one gulp." He heaved a sigh. "You, this wife of mine, were not easy to get at all. If I was to gulp you down, then I'd have nothing left."

Yan Qi: "Well, if this one is gone, isn't it the perfect opportunity to go find another?"

Guo DaLu: "Find who?"

Yan Qi: "For example... Sour Plum Soup."

Guo DaLu answered slowly, "Won't work. She is too sour, and plus, the one she fancies is you." He suddenly chuckled. "I finally know now, that day, when you would not have her,

why she was not the slightest bit angry... That day, you must have told her that you are just like her, you are a girl."

Yan Qi: "If I was a man, I would take her."

Guo DaLu: "Why is it that all along, you were not willing to tell me that you are a girl?"

Yan Qi: "Who told you to be a blind man? Other people could tell; it's just you who couldn't."

Guo DaLu: "The secret you wanted to tell me was this one?"

Yan Qi: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Why did you have to wait until I was near death before you were willing to tell me?"

"Because... because I was scared you would not want me..." Before she had finished her sentence, it sounded as if something had suddenly covered her lips. After a long time, gasping lightly, she scolded, "Let's chat properly. You are not allowed to move about anymore."

Guo DaLu: "Alright. I won't move. But why would you be afraid that I would not want you? Don't you know that, even if I could have everyone else in the world in exchange for you, I still would not trade?"

Yan Qi: "Honest?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course it's true."

Yan Qi: "What if you could trade for Shui RouQing?"

With a sigh, Guo DaLu answered, "Shui RouQing truly is a very good woman, and on top of that, she is very pitiable. Unfortunately, my heart was already fully occupied by you

alone a long time ago and has no room for any other person.”

A squeak could be heard from Yan Qi. Inside that embroidered curtain, it suddenly grew silent for another long while. It seemed like something was obstructing both their mouths now. After quite some time again, Guo DaLu exhaled another sigh and said, “I know you did that to test whether I am loyal to you.”

Chewing on her lip, Yan Qi confirmed, “If you had been willing to stay there in that place, then you could have given up on any hope of seeing me again in this lifetime.”

Guo DaLu: “But, after I arrived here, why did you not let me see you?”

Yan Qi: “Because there were other people who wanted to test you, to see whether you are smart enough and brave enough, to see whether your heart is kind enough and whether you are worthy enough to be my Papa’s son-in-law.”

Guo DaLu: “So they wanted to see whether I was smart enough to find the secret of this house and whether I had enough courage to go to the Dragon King Temple.”

Yan Qi: “At Dragon King Temple, if you had even dared to have the bad idea of touching my little cousin [orig. biao mei; younger (female) cousin] or if you had not been willing to take her home first, even if you found this place, you still would not have seen me.”

Exhaling, Guo DaLu said, “Luckily, I am a smart, brave, good person...”

Yan Qi giggled and interrupted, “Otherwise, how could you marry me, such a good wife?”

“Only now have I realized that we really are a match made in heaven,” Guo DaLu sighed.

Yan Qi: “You only realized now?”

Guo DaLu grinned, “Because I only just realized that the skin on our faces are both thick.”

Only now did this room really feel like a newlyweds’ room, and, in fact, was sweeter and more beautiful than the newlyweds’ room of your imagination.

They deserved to enjoy it. Because their love could withstand testing. It really had not been easy for them to reach this day.

A diamond must go through polishing before it can give off its brilliance.

Love and friendship are also the same.

Love and friendship that are unable to withstand testing are like a flower made of paper, which neither has the brilliant color and fragrance of a flower nor will ever bear fruit.

The trees had borne fruit. Although spring had left and was far away by now, the season of harvest was quickly approaching.

Yan Qi sat beneath a tree. Taking the large straw hat off her head and using it as a fan, she mumbled, “Such hot weather. I bet Wang Laoda must be even less inclined to move.”

Guo DaLu was gazing off at some distant place. “I wonder what he and Xiao Lin were doing during this time.”

Yan Qi: "Don't worry. They definitely are not lonely. Especially Xiao Lin."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Yan Qi giggled sweetly. "Have you forgotten about that flower vendor-girl?"

Guo DaLu starting laughing as well, and then immediately, he heard that clear sound of singing:

"Little young miss daybreak arises,
Carrying a flower basket to the market.
Passing through the main street, walking through the alleyway,
'Flowers for sale, flowers for sale,' her voice a-crying..."

Of course, that singing was not coming from that young girl. The one singing was Yan Qi. She waved the straw hat lightly and sang in drawn out tones, causing the people who were walking along the road to turn their heads and stare wide-eyed at her.

Grinning, Guo DaLu reminded her, "Don't forget what clothes you are wearing right now."

She was still dressed up as a man, but the sound of her singing was clear like that of an oriole leaving the valley. Laughing in response, she told him, "Doesn't matter. In any case, even if I don't sing, people can still tell that I am a woman. For a woman to actually be able to disguise herself so that she looks like a man is not an easy thing to do."

Guo DaLu: "What about you before?"

Yan Qi: "It was different before."

Guo DaLu: "What was different?"

Yan Qi laughed, "Before, I was relatively dirty... awfully dirty. Everyone thinks that women should always be cleaner than men."

Guo Dalu: "And in reality?"

With a glare at him, Yan Qi answered, "In reality, women have always been cleaner than men."

This road was the road back to Wealthy Manor.

They had not forgotten about their friends. They wanted to share their own joys with their friends.

"If Wang Laoda and Xiao Lin know that we... we are already husband and wife, they will definitely be very happy."

"I wonder if Xiao Lin will be jealous."

After finishing this sentence, he started to run. Yan Qi chased after him.

They were not travelling in a carriage or riding horses. Along the way, they had laughed and ran and chased like two children. Doesn't happiness always cause people to become youthful? When they grew tired from running, they would sit in the shade of a tree, buy a lao bing [tortilla-like flat cake made of flour], and eat it as lunch. Even a tasteless, hard flat cake, when savoured on their lips, was sweet.

Surprisingly, Guo DaLu had not had any wine to drink for several days except for that day before they had left, when NanGong Chou had held a farewell dinner in honor of his daughter and son-in-law. Not only did NanGong Chou make an exception and drink half a cup himself, he had also wanted all of them to drink away heartily. And so, they had all become drunk.

Smiling lightly, Yan Qi explained, "Even though my Papa cannot drink himself, he really enjoys watching other people drink."

"His capacity for wine must not have been bad in the past, then," Guo DaLu grinned.

Yan Qi: "Not just 'not bad.' Ten Guo DaLus combined may not have been able to beat him in drinking."

Guo DaLu: "Ha! "

Yan Qi: "What is 'ha' supposed to mean?"

Guo DaLu: " 'Ha' means that, not only am I unwilling to give in to that idea, I also don't believe you."

"But sadly, he is old now and his old injury has relapsed so that he has been lying on the bed and unable to move for many years already. Otherwise, it would have been a wonder if he did not fill you up with wine until you were crawling drunkenly around on the floor." As her father's ailment was brought up, she could not stop the expression of sorrow from showing in her eyes.

Sighing softly, Guo DaLu said, "He really is a very remarkable person. I never expected him to allow us to leave."

Yan Qi: "Why?"

Guo DaLu: "Because... because he really is so lonely. If it had been anyone else in his place, that person would have insisted that we stay and keep him company."

Yan Qi: "But he is different. He has never wanted people to be miserable because of him. No matter how unbearable

something may be, he would still rather endure it alone.” Her eyes were glowing again with a brilliance, and it was evident that it was because she was proud to have such a father.

Exhaling a lengthy breath, Guo DaLu remarked, “To be honest, I had never thought that he would be such a person.”

Yan Qi: “What kind of person did you used to think he would be like?”

“You know,” Guo DaLu answered slowly, “how terrifying the tales and rumours of jianghu make him out to be.”

Yan Qi: “And now?”

Guo DaLu heaved another sigh. “Only now do I realize that what’s truly terrifying are those rumours of jianghu, and yet, he could actually put up with them for so many years. Just based on this point alone, there is no one else who can compare to him.”

Yan Qi pointed out dejectedly, “Perhaps it is because he has no choice but to bear it.”

Guo DaLu: “Luckily he still has friends. I see the faithfulness and friendship that Divine Hunchback and the others have for him, and I cannot help feeling happy and touched for him.”

Yan Qi was silent for quite some time before asking out of the blue, “Do you know how they used to treat him?”

Guo DaLu shook his head.

“They, too, had once had the sole intent of killing him,” she explained, “but after several fights of life and death, they

discovered as well that he was not the type of person described in those tales. They were also moved by his moral character and, as a result, became his friends.” She smiled, a smile that was very forlorn, yet also somewhat proud, and carried on, “Golden Arhat was even willing to betray Shaolin for him and become a traitor that could never again see the light of day.”

Guo DaLu: “It is these types of awesome relationships and feelings that distinguish humans from animals.”

Yan Qi: “And the awesomeness of these feelings can only be demonstrated in life and death and adversity.

What they said is correct. Only in times of life and death or adversity can a person’s greatness be revealed.

The price that had been paid by NanGong Chou to win Divine Hunchback and the other people’s friendships must have been one of incredible pain and likely was something that was unimaginable to others. How else could people have seen the greatness of moral character, unless, in a moment of life or death, he had sacrificed himself to save others? And why else would they be willing to sacrifice everything for him now?

Of course, there must be a story behind all of this, one that could shake someone to the core or cause tears of sorrow to be shed. There is no need to tell this story anymore, though. That is because the story we should be telling right now is one that makes people happy. The world has enough sad stories already.

It has too many.

Not dusk, but already close to dusk.

The sun may have descended into the west already, but the gravel road was still very warm and hot to touch.

Under the shade of a tree up ahead, there was a ragged and haggard-looking woman [orig. fu ren; means 'married woman'] holding the hand of one child and carrying another child on her back. Her head was lowered and one hand was stretched out to beg from passersby.

Guo DaLu immediately walked over, fished out a small piece of silver, and placed it in her hand. He never passed over a single beggar. Even if all he had left was this piece of silver, without even needing to stop and consider, he would still give it away. Yan Qi was looking at him, her tender gaze expressing silent praise. It was clear that she was proud she had such a husband.

The woman mumbled words of thanks from her lips. Just as she was about to tuck the silver piece away in the front of her garments, she lifted her head and accidentally caught a glimpse of Guo DaLu. In an instant, a frightening change that is impossible to describe occurred on that thin, wan face. Her pair of lifeless, bloodshot eyes immediately bulged out like those of a dead fish, as if a knife had suddenly stabbed into her heart.

Guo DaLu had actually still been smiling lightly, but the smile gradually froze over, and on his face, there was an appalled expression. "It's you?!" he exclaimed.

"It's you?!" he exclaimed.

The woman covered her face with her hands immediately and cried, "You go away! I don't know you."

The look on Guo DaLu's face had changed from shock to pity. Heaving a long sigh, he asked, "How did you become like

this?”

The woman retorted, “That is my business. It has nothing to do with you.” With much difficulty, she was able to get ahold of herself, but her whole body was still shaking like a candle’s flame in the wind.

Guo DaLu shifted his gaze down to the two children, whose development seemed to be stunted and whose faces were covered in nasal mucus. “They are the children you had with him?” he asked sadly. “Where is he?”

The woman was trembling, and at last, she could restrain herself no longer and began crying loudly. Covering her face, she wept bitterly, “He lied to me. He swindled me of my savings and ran off with another woman, but he left me with these two kids [orig. nie zhong, which is a much stronger (negative) word that means ‘seed or result of sin/evil/misdeeds’]. Why must my fate be so bitter? Why?”

Nobody could answer that for her, only herself. Did she not bring these tragic, painful experiences onto herself?

Guo DaLu sighed, not certain what he should say. Yan Qi slowly walked over to him and without a word, took his hand in hers, letting him know that, no matter what it was they encountered, she would still stand with him on his side and always trust him just the same.

Out of the things a woman can give a man, what could make a man more grateful to her than this sort of trust and understanding?

Guo DaLu guessed, “You know who she?”

Yan Qi nodded. When it comes to the man she loves, a woman seems to naturally possess a remarkably keen sixth sense. She had already sensed long ago that there was a

very unusual relationship between her own husband and this woman, and after listening to their words, she had no doubts at all. Clearly, this was the woman who had once deceived and abandoned Guo DaLu.

Exhaling another lengthy sigh, Guo DaLu said, "I really had never imagined that I would see her here and even more so, had never thought that she would become like this."

"Since she is your friend, you should do your best to help her," Yan Qi told him tenderly.

The woman suddenly ceased the sound of her crying. Lifting up her head, she glared at Yan Qi and demanded, "Who are you?"

Yan Qi's eyes were gentle and serene as she replied, "I am his wife."

A strange sort of transformation overcame this woman's face again. Turning her head to stare at Guo DaLu, she asked in astonishment, "You're married?"

"Yes," Guo DaLu answered.

The woman looked at him, then at Yan Qi. A malicious type of jealousy suddenly appeared in her eyes, and without warning, she grabbed onto Guo DaLu's collar while she yelled, "You originally should have married me. How could you go and marry someone else?"

Guo DaLu stood there immobile and his face was white as paper. He honestly did not know what to do in such a situation.

Yan Qi squeezed his hand even tighter. With her eyes fixed intently on the woman, she reminded, "It is you who left him. It was not him who did not want you. You should

remember the things that happened between you in the past.”

The woman’s eyes grew even more spiteful. Laughing wickedly, she retorted, “What should I remember? All I remember is that he once told me he would forever only love me, and besides me, he would never marry any other woman.” She put on another sorrowful look, as if tears were going to flow again, and made the corner of her lips quiver.

Raising her voice, she wailed, “But he deceived me, deceived this cruel-fated woman. All of you, please come and judge who is right and who is wrong...” Passersby on the road had started to encircle them, and they glared at Guo DaLu with contempt and loathing. Guo DaLu’s ashen face had now turned to bright red and beads of sweat had formed on it.

Yan Qi’s expression was still unperturbed, though, and in an indifferent tone, she countered, “He did not deceive you. He has never deceived you. But sadly, you are not that same person you once were. You, yourself, should understand this.”

The woman shouted and jumped about. “I don’t understand anything. I don’t want to live anymore... Even if I die, I am going to die together with this heartless man.” She put her head down and charged forward into Guo DaLu. Then she lay on the ground and refused to get up.

Anyone who came across such an unreasonable woman, one who shifted the blame to others and made such a scene, would have no way of dealing with her either. Guo DaLu simply did not know what to do. All he wished was that he could find a crack in the ground and burrow himself into it.

Yan Qi hesitated, then suddenly pulled out a gold necklace. Holding it up in front of the woman and handing it over to her, she asked, "Do you recognize this?"

The woman's eyes grew wide, and she was taken aback for a while before she declared loudly, "Of course I recognize it. This was mine originally."

"That is why I am returning it to you now," Yan Qi stated. "My only wish is that you will know that, in order to keep this necklace, he was willing to endure hunger and accusations and even scorn from his friends. Why would he do that? I'm sure you are able to figure out the answer to that."

The woman stared at that gold necklace, the look of hatred slowly transforming into one of shame. She was, after all, a human being.

Humans. More or less, they will always have some human nature in them.

Yan Qi continued, "Once you trade in this gold necklace, you should have enough to start a small business and raise your children well. I am certain you will meet a good man in the future. As long as you do not lie to others, people will not lie to you either."

The woman's body had started to tremble again. Turning her head, she looked over at her children. The children's faces were covered in fright, and their mouths were opened wide as if they wanted to cry but were so scared that they did not dare cry out loud.

"Do not forget that you are a mother," Yan Qi told her in a kind voice. "You should think about your child. He is going to be grown up one day, and you should make him proud to have a mother like you."

The woman was shaking. All of a sudden, she threw herself facedown on the ground and began sobbing. "Heaven... Heaven, why did you allow me to see him? Why?" she wept.

No one could provide an answer for this either; only she could.

The type of seed that you sow is what you are going to reap. If what you plant are sand and stones, then you should never hope that they will blossom and become beautiful flowers.

Dusk.

The setting sun had already transformed from dazzling to serene.

It was apparent that Guo DaLu's mood was just as low and heavy as the look on his face. Yan Qi did not speak, did not disturb him. She knew that everyone has times when they need to be quiet and alone with themselves. This is also something that a woman who is a wife needs to understand.

It was not known how much time passed before Guo DaLu finally asked quietly, "When did you go to redeem the gold necklace back? Why didn't you tell me?"

With a chuckle, Yan Qi replied, "Because I never did redeem it."

Guo DaLu: "You didn't?"

Yan Qi: "The gold necklace I gave her just now is not your necklace."

Surprised, Guo DaLu blurted, "It's not?"

Smiling, Yan Qi explained, "It was the wedding gift that Sister MeiLan gave to me in private."

Guo DaLu: "Then why did you take it out? Why did you do that?"

Yan Qi laughed, "Because I am a woman as well. I should understand women much better than you."

Guo DaLu: "You're saying that when she saw that gold necklace, she remembered that how I treated her before was not bad, and that is why she let me off the hook?"

Her lips curled up slightly in a giggle. "All gold necklaces look about the same. Even you could not tell the difference, much less her." Her laughter was very cheerful. The necklace was merely a symbol that represented those experiences of the past.

Now, though, neither of them was even able to differentiate that necklace from others. Clearly, the love and hate of their past had all faded from their memories. Regardless of how understanding a woman may be, she still would not want her husband to keep the things from former days in his heart.

Guo DaLu countered, "But when she saw me, that should have been enough to make her think of everything from before..."

"She was treating you that way," Yan Qi interrupted, "not because of things from the past but because of jealousy."

"Jealousy?" Guo DaLu repeated.

"And it is not because she is jealous of you; she's jealous of me. She looked at her own life, then looked at ours in comparison, and she regretted even more what she did."

Yan Qi heaved a sigh before carrying on, "When a person views herself with a hateful regret, it is not uncommon that she will start holding an abnormal hatred for other people, and she will wish that everyone else in the world will have to endure pain just like her."

Sighing as well, Guo DaLu added, "That's why she wanted to break us up."

Yan Qi: "She hates you only because she knows that she can never again have you."

Guo DaLu: "But why is it that, when she saw the gold necklace, things suddenly changed again?"

"Because the gold necklace is different from you." Smiling charmingly, she explained, "Not only is a gold necklace more attractive to look at than you, she also knew for certain that she could possess it."

"Is it because the gold necklace was already in her hands?" Guo DaLu asked.

Yan Qi laughed, "Correct answer! "

Indeed, in this world, only women can understand women.

Women have always believed only in the things that they are already holding in their hand. Even if she knew that there were still another one hundred gold necklaces that she could take away with her, she still would not have been willing to trade the one in her hand for those ones.

And there are not many women who are willing to give her own necklace to her husband's previous love. Only the most intelligent women would be willing. She only needed to use one gold necklace, and in exchange, she gained her

husband's trust and gratitude as well as her own lifetime of happiness.

Guo DaLu gazed intently at his own wife. Overcome with emotion, he took hold of her hand and said tenderly, "Thank you."

Yan Qi batted her eyes and giggled, "Thank me?..... Thank you for that gold necklace of mine?"

Guo DaLu shook his head. "You should know what I am thanking you for."

Indeed, Yan Qi did know. What he was grateful for was, of course, not that necklace but her understanding and considerateness. These things were much more valuable than all the gold necklaces added together.

A wife who knows how to be understanding and considerate will forever be a man's greatest blessing and wealth.

But it will also forever only be the luckiest of men who can have this.

End of Chapter 44

Chapter 45 - Lover? Enemy?

Are there really people in the world who are born lucky? Perhaps there are, but in any case, I have not seen one yet.

I, of course, have seen many lucky people, but their luck all came because they had used their intelligence, determination, and courage to exchange for it. Luck is just like a lao bing [tortilla-like flat cake made of flour]. It must be kneaded with force, fried in oil, and baked in fire. It definitely will not just fall from the sky.

A lucky person is just like a new bride – no matter where she goes, people will give a couple more glances in her direction. Regardless of how ordinary a person she is, the instant she is a bride, it is as if she suddenly has become special.

The three of them – Wang Dong, Lin TaiPing, and Hong NiangZi – were standing in a row, gawking at Yan Qi, eyeing her from her head down to her toe and then from her toe back up to her head.

Yan Qi's face had grown red from all their stares, looking like a freshly picked hawthorn fruit and so red it was burning. She could not help lowering her head as she protested, "It is not as if you don't know me. What are you staring at me for?"

Hong NiangZi answered sweetly, "But you are 3600 times more attractive to look at than before."

Yan Qi's cheeks coloured an even deeper shade. "But I am still me. That point has not changed."

"You have changed," Wang Dong disagreed.

Yan Qi asked, "How have I changed?"

Lin TaiPing rushed in to answer, "Before, you were our friend, but now you have become our sao zi [sister-in-law]. Before, you were Yan Qi, but now you have become Mrs. Guo. Isn't this change significant enough?"

Nibbling on her lip, Yan Qi protested, "I am still Yan Qi, still your friend."

Hong NiangZi giggled, "But at the very least, this Yan Qi is a lot cleaner than before."

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from jumping in. "Correct answer! She bathes everyday now." He had just finished saying this and then Hong NiangZi was already bent over at the waist in laughter.

Yan Qi threw a deadly glare at him, her face flushed. "Will you just shut-up and say a few less words? No one thinks you're a mute."

More laughter slipped out from Hong NiangZi. "If he really was able to make himself say less, then he would not be Guo DaLu."

Guo DaLu gave a couple of dry coughs. Then, puffing out his chest, he said, "Really, I have changed too. Why aren't you guys looking at me?"

Frowning, Wang Dong asked, "How have you changed? How come I can't see anything?"

"Haven't I changed to become a little more attractive-looking?" Guo DaLu argued.

Wang Dong looked him up and down a few times before shaking his head and answering, "I can't tell."

Guo DaLu: "At the very least, I am a little cleaner than before too."

Hong NiangZi suppressed her mirth to inquire, "You bathe everyday now, too?"

Guo DaLu: "Of course. I..."

This time, before the words had even come off his lips, Hong NiangZi was already doubled over in laughter again.

Yan Qi hurriedly interrupted and asked loudly, "Why is it that this place seems like it is short one person?"

Lin TaiPing jumped in to respond. "Who?"

Batting her lids, Yan Qi grinned, "Of course that day-break-arises-carries-a-flower-basket-to-the-market girl."

"Of course we cannot be without this person," Hong NiangZi answered with a smile.

Yan Qi: "Where is she?"

Hong NiangZi: "Off to the market again, but this time she is not carrying a flower basket but actually a shopping basket – because our Lin Dashao [Young Master Lin] suddenly wanted to eat that new product at the market, stir-fried spinach and bean curd."

Yan Qi was stifling her giggles also now. With a deliberate sigh, she remarked, "Who would have thought that, at such a young age, she would already know so well how to be kind and considerate of other people's needs."

"People who are naturally kind and considerate will, regardless of age, always be kind and considerate," Hong NiangZi pointed out. Peeking at Lin TaiPing from the corner

of her eye, she added, "They're just like people who naturally seem to have good fortune. What do you say? Yes?"

Lin TaiPing's face had also turned scarlet now, and he suddenly yelled loudly, "Could you two just be quiet and say a few less words too? I won't think you are mute either."

Guo DaLu replied for them in a nonchalant tone, "Can't. If they were able to say a little less, they wouldn't be women."

Wang Dong: "Correct answer."

The glow of sunset on the clouds filled the sky.

Drifting in again on the evening wind was the melodious, silvery sound of singing:

"Little young miss daybreak arises,
Carrying a flower basket to the market..."

Yan Qi exchanged a look with HongNiangzi, and she could not help chuckling, "Little young miss has come back from the market."

Laughing also, Hong NiangZi reminded, "And, her flower basket is also packed full with green vegetables and bean curd."

A clear and ringing voice like a silver bell was heard giggling as it chimed, "Not just spinach and bean curd. There is also wine."

Sure enough, the little young miss had returned, carrying a bamboo basket as she stood in the doorway. And sure enough, her right hand held a large pitcher of wine. She seemed not as bashful as before for her cheeks were only tinged with a slight hue of pink.

Wang Dong: "Wine? What wine?"

Smiling prettily, the little young miss answered, "Of course a wedding wine [orig. xi jiu; refers to wine drunk at a wedding feast or the wedding feast itself]. I saw them at the foot of the mountain, all loving and intimate, so right away, I knew that I should buy some wedding wine and bring it back."

Yan Qi blinked innocently at her. "Whose wedding wine is it? Ours? Or yours?"

The little young miss let out a little squeak. Her face was blushing brightly as she ran away along the wall, all the way to the rear courtyard. Yan Qi and Hong NiangZi were chortling so hard they were both bent over at the waist.

Lin TaiPing suddenly exhaled a sigh. "I really don't get it," he muttered. "Why do you guys always like to pick on simple and good-natured people?"

Wang Dong: "Because simple and good-natured people are getting fewer and fewer. If we do not pick on them now, we won't have that chance in the future."

This was not a conclusion.

Are there really people in the world who are born lucky? Perhaps there are, but in any case, I have not seen one yet.

I, of course, have seen many lucky people, but their luck all came because they had used their intelligence, determination, and courage to exchange for it. Luck is just like a lao bing [tortilla-like flat cake made of flour]. It must be kneaded with force, fried in oil, and baked in fire. It definitely will not just fall from the sky.

A lucky person is just like a new bride – no matter where she goes, people will give a couple more glances in her direction. Regardless of how ordinary a person she is, the instant she is a bride, it is as if she suddenly has become special.

The three of them – Wang Dong, Lin TaiPing, and Hong NiangZi – were standing in a row, gawking at Yan Qi, eyeing her from her head down to her toe and then from her toe back up to her head.

Yan Qi's face had grown red from all their stares, looking like a freshly picked hawthorn fruit and so red it was burning. She could not help lowering her head as she protested, "It is not as if you don't know me. What are you staring at me for?"

Hong NiangZi answered sweetly, "But you are 3600 times more attractive to look at than before."

Yan Qi's cheeks coloured an even deeper shade. "But I am still me. That point has not changed."

"You have changed," Wang Dong disagreed.

Yan Qi asked, "How have I changed?"

Lin TaiPing rushed in to answer, "Before, you were our friend, but now you have become our sao zi [sister-in-law]. Before, you were Yan Qi, but now you have become Mrs. Guo. Isn't this change significant enough?"

Nibbling on her lip, Yan Qi protested, "I am still Yan Qi, still your friend."

Hong NiangZi giggled, "But at the very least, this Yan Qi is a lot cleaner than before."

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from jumping in. "Correct answer! She bathes everyday now." He had just finished saying this and then Hong NiangZi was already bent over at the waist in laughter.

Yan Qi threw a deadly glare at him, her face flushed. "Will you just shut-up and say a few less words? No one thinks you're a mute."

More laughter slipped out from Hong NiangZi. "If he really was able to make himself say less, then he would not be Guo DaLu."

Guo DaLu gave a couple of dry coughs. Then, puffing out his chest, he said, "Really, I have changed too. Why aren't you guys looking at me?"

Frowning, Wang Dong asked, "How have you changed? How come I can't see anything?"

"Haven't I changed to become a little more attractive-looking?" Guo DaLu argued.

Wang Dong looked him up and down a few times before shaking his head and answering, "I can't tell."

Guo DaLu: "At the very least, I am a little cleaner than before too."

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Wang Dong: "Because simple and good-natured people are getting fewer and fewer. If we do not pick on them now, we won't have that chance in the future."

This was not a conclusion.

A wedding celebration without wine is like a dish of food without salt. This saying of course, had been spoken by a very intelligent person, but unfortunately, he had forgotten to include the line that followed: A belly with wine in it will cause the head to hurt.

The next morning when he arose, Guo DaLu's head hurt terribly. Not surprisingly, he was not the first one out of bed – he had just discovered that sometimes, sleeping was not considered a waste of time.

When he got up, Lin TaiPing and the young girl were already in the courtyard whispering away, but he could not tell what they were talking about. No matter what it was they were saying, though, they found it all very interesting and very happy.

Even though the spring flowers had faded away now, the summer flowers were in full bloom. They were standing there in front of the flowering shrubs as the newly risen sun shone

upon their blissful, happy faces. They, too, were like the sun, filled with brightness and hope. As Guo DaLu watched them, his headache seemed to ease slightly.

Yan Qi walked out quietly and nestled herself against his side. One hand was twirling her long, black hair while her other arm had looped around his arm. Her eyes were also filled with happiness and bliss.

In this space between heaven and earth, peace and tranquility were present. Life was truly worth treasuring.

After a very long time had elapsed, Yan Qi finally asked softly, "What are you thinking about?"

Guo DaLu: "I am thinking about two other people."

Yan Qi: "Who? Wang Dong and..."

Nodding his head, he gave a sigh and said, "I was thinking and wondering how long we will have to wait before they will be affectionate like this too."

Yan Qi was gazing at her husband. A long, long time passed before she said gently, "Do you know why I love you?"

Guo DaLu did not speak. He was waiting to hear. He liked hearing it.

In a tender voice, she told him, "Because in your times of happiness, you are still able to think of your friends' happiness. Because, at any time, you still will not forget about your friends."

Guo DaLu blinked at her. "You are wrong. Sometimes I will forget about them."

"What sort of times?" Yan Qi wondered.

In a whisper, Guo DaLu replied, "Last night..." Before he could say it out, red had already flown into Yan Qi's cheeks, and she grabbed up his hand and bit down hard on it.

Lin TaiPing's voice could be heard saying, "I never would have thought that our Guo Dasao [Sister-in-Law Guo] actually bites people too." Those two had turned around at some unknown time and were now watching them with little smiles on their faces.

Guo DaLu grinned, "You don't understand. A man that has never been bit by a woman cannot be considered a man."

"Which country's philosophy is that?" Lin TaiPing asked.

Guo DaLu: "My country. But perhaps really soon you will be coming over to my country, too."

The young girl's face had also turned crimson by now. With her head lowered, she said, "I'm going to go prepare breakfast..."

Guo DaLu guffawed, "Prepare a little bit more. It'll be good to use it to plug up our mouths."

It was now breakfast time.

Beneath that deep blue dome of the heavens, milky-white smoke from cooking fires rose up all around. Turning his face upward, Guo DaLu muttered, "Why is this area suddenly so lively? Have there been lots of households that have moved here lately?"

Lin TaiPing answered, "No."

Guo DaLu stared at the cooking smoke that was rising upward from the hillside. "If there are no people or families, where would the cooking smoke come from?"

Lin TaiPing was also looking in the direction from where the smoke was rising up. "Just yesterday afternoon, I was strolling around over there. There wasn't even a single family there."

Yan Qi mused, "Even if some people had moved here last night, there wouldn't suddenly be so many families moving here all at once."

Lin TaiPing: "Plus, there are no places in the vicinity that are fit for people to live."

Yan Qi: "Except you can have also cooking fires when camping."

Guo DaLu: "Why would there suddenly be so many people coming here to start fires? Could they really have nothing better to do?"

They heard someone say in an unhurried tone, "If you guys are just going to stay here and guess, you could guess until next year and it still won't produce any results. Why don't you just go have a look for yourselves?" Wang Dong walked in lazily from outside the door. There was still no trace of expression on his face.

Guo DaLu was the first to go over and greet him as he rushed to ask, "You have already gone out and looked?"

Wang Dong: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Where is the smoke coming from?"

Wang Dong: "Fires."

Guo DaLu: "Who started the fires?"

Wang Dong: "People."

Guo DaLu: "What kind of people?"

Wang Dong: "The ones who have two legs."

Guo DaLu gave a sigh and with a cynical smile, realized, "It seems if I keep asking like this, I could be asking until next year and it still would not produce any results either. It's better if I go look for myself."

"You should have gone out to look a long time ago," Wang Dong pointed out.

Behind Wealthy Manor was the ridge of the mountain, and there was no passable route through it.

On the hillside in front of the manor, eight huge tents had unexpectedly been set-up in a single night. The tents were a very unusual shape. They looked a bit like the Mongolian yurts used by the herding people outside the passes but also a bit like the camp tents used by a marching army. In front of every tent, a fire had been started. Over the fire, a whole, plump goat was roasting, strung on an iron bar while it rotated slowly.

A big man, stark naked from waist up, was taking some pre-blended seasonings and using a brush to spread them onto the goats. His motions were gentle and attentive, like a mother giving her first baby a bath.

The smell of roasted meats was of course stronger than the fragrance of flowers.

There was meat on the breakfast table too. They had just come back from a walk outside and should have been hungry. However, besides Guo DaLu, it seemed like everyone else did not have much of an appetite.

Each one of them knew in his or her heart that those tents would not be set up here for no cause or reason. Since those people were able to put up eight tents of such enormous size in a single night without making any noise or sound, it was unlikely there was anything in the world they could not achieve.

At last, Yan Qi let out a sigh and remarked, "It looks like trouble has arrived again for us."

A melancholy expression seemed to fill Hong NiangZi's eyes. "And what is more, the troubles this time are not small."

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Yan Qi added, "But I wonder who was the one who stirred up the troubles this time."

"This time, it definitely was not me," Guo DaLu immediately jumped in to say.

Yan Qi: "Oh?"

"I am not able to stir up such big trouble." He suddenly chuckled, "I have always been a person whose little troubles are endless but whose big troubles are non-existent."

Yan Qi: "How do you know whether the troubles are big or small?"

Guo DaLu: "Unless it was for something big, who would willingly set-up eight such gigantic tents in front of someone's front door?"

Yan Qi: "But up until this point in time, we still cannot tell what troubles they are."

Guo DaLu: "You can't tell?"

Yan Qi: "They have merely gone and put up some tents on that empty piece of land outside and roasted their own meats. They have not come over to provoke us."

Guo DaLu: "In your opinion, there is no trouble?"

Yan Qi: "Mm."

Guo DaLu: "Just now, who was the one who said trouble had arrived."

Yan Qi: "Me."

Guo DaLu: "Why have you suddenly changed your mind?"

Smiling sweetly, Yan Qi answered, "Because this place is too boring. I want to have a little spat with you."

Guo DaLu: "What if I said there is no trouble?"

Yan Qi: "I would have said there is."

With a sigh and a bitter smile, Guo DaLu said, "From the looks of it, even if I did not want to bicker with you, it still would not be avoidable."

"Correct answer," Yan Qi giggled.

If a woman wants to have a squabble with her husband, in every ke [ancient division of time; 1 ke = 14.4 min], she could find eight opportunities to do so. But sometimes a squabble is not a bad thing. At the very least, it helps lighten up the mood of the people watching the bickering. That is why the instant they started arguing, people started to laugh.

Hong NiangZi chuckled, "No matter what, at least those people have not sought us out yet. Why, then, should we look for things to worry about?"

Alas, there was no need for them look for anything now for the worry had already come through their doorway. Someone had walked in slowly from outside the door.

This person was very tall, very thin. On his body, he wore a very bizarre-colored long gown that was actually a miserable-looking green color. His complexion was also very gloomy, similar to his clothing. And his pair of eyes was dull and without light, like two endless caves, so that one could not differentiate between the pupils and the whites of his eyes. He was actually a blind man.

However, his steps were very light. It was as if his feet had grown a pair of eyes on them so he never stepped on any stones and furthermore, would not fall into any holes. With his hands clasped behind his back, he slowly walked inside. Although the look on his face was gloomy, his manner appeared very relaxed.

Unable to contain himself, Guo DaLu asked, "Sir, are you here to look for someone? Who are you looking for?"

The green-gowned man seemed not to have heard him.

Guo DaLu's brows were knit together. "Could this person not only be blind but deaf as well?"

In the flowerbed by the corner of the wall, the summer flowers were blooming brilliantly. The green-gowned walked along the flowerbed, then walked back again, all the while inhaling deeply. Although he could no longer use his eyes to admire the bright colors of the flowers, he could still use his nose to appreciate their fragrance. Perhaps what he could actually appreciate was more than what someone with eyes could.

He walked back and forth along the flowerbed a total of two times without saying anything, and then, he slowly walked back outside.

Guo DaLu could breathe easy again. "It appears this person was not really here to seek out trouble. He just came here to smell the fragrance of flowers."

Yan Qi pointed out, "How would he know this place has flowers?"

Guo DaLu: "Naturally, his nose is more sensitive than ours."

Yan Qi: "But where did he come from?"

Guo DaLu laughed, "I don't know him. How would I know?"

Wang Dong spoke suddenly. "I know."

Guo DaLu: "You know?"

Wang Dong nodded.

Guo DaLu: "So where do you say he came from?"

Wang Dong: "From the tents."

Guo DaLu: "How do you know?"

Wang Dong's expression seemed to have grown very grim, and he answered slowly, "Because at this point in time, no other people could possibly get to this place. We also are not able to go anywhere."

Guo DaLu: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because those eight tents have completely blocked off all accesses in and out."

The look on Guo DaLu's face changed as he realized, "You are saying that they put up those eight tents outside for the purpose of not letting anyone come here and not allowing the people in here to go out?"

Wang Dong did not open his mouth to speak again. His eyes were fixated on the flowerbed, and his expression had become even grimmer. Guo DaLu could not help turning his head back along with Wang Dong and casting a glance there also. Immediately, his expression changed also. The flowers that had been blooming perfectly fine before had now all unexpectedly wilted away. The captivatingly red flower petals had all suddenly turned black, and when the wind blew by, they fell to the ground, one petal after another.

"What is going on here?" Guo DaLu exclaimed. "Is it poison released from that person a moment ago?"

Wang Dong: "Hmph."

Guo DaLu: "Don't tell me that person is a poisonous snake? All he needs to do is walk by a place and then all the flowers and grass will die of poisoning?"

Wang Dong: "I'm afraid even a poisonous snake is not as poisonous as him."

Yan Qi remarked, "Yes. I had always thought that 'No Opening Left Unentered' Scarlet Serpent was the number one master of using poisons under all of heaven, but in comparison to this person, it appears he would still have been greatly inferior."

"Still greatly inferior?" Guo DaLu repeated. This question was not for Yan Qi; it was directed at Hong NiangZi.

Sighing, Hong NiangZi replied, "Scarlet Serpent still needed the aid of other things in order to use poison. He would still

need to put the poison in food or water and on weapons or concealed weapons, but this person can actually use his poisons and not even show a shadow. It is as if he can kill someone using poison in the space of a breath.”

Guo DaLu did not continue to ask. If even Hong NiangZi said this person’s poisoning abilities were higher than Scarlet Serpent, it meant there was no more doubt about it.

The questions now was, who was this person, and why would he come here and kill all their flowers with poison?

Before there was an answer to the question, though, a second problem had arrived. From outside the door, another person had walked on in.

From outside the door, another person had walked on in.

This person was very short, very plump. On his body, he wore bright scarlet clothing, and his round face had a red glow that seemed even redder than his clothes. He, too, had clasped his hands behind his back as he leisurely walked in, and his expression was also very relaxed.

This time, no one asked him the reason why he was there and instead, only staring wide-eyed at him. In any case, all the flowers in the courtyard had died of poisoning already. Let’s see what other tricks you want to play.

This red-clothed person also simply seemed not to see them as he slowly ambled around the courtyard once. Then, with a flourish of his sleeve, he turned and left abruptly. Not only did he not say anything, he did not play any tricks either.

But on the ground, there was now a circle of footprints. Each footprint was extremely deep, like it had been carved out with a knife.

Guo DaLu sighed and looked over at Yan Qi. "I would rather let an elephant stomp once on me than have this person step on me with his foot. What about you?" he asked.

Yan Qi replied, "I would not want either."

Guo DaLu could not help chuckling, "You're much smarter than me." He did not laugh for long, though, because someone had shown up outside the door again.

This time, the one who arrived was a white-clothed man. He was dressed entirely in garments as white as snow, and his expression was also cold like ice and snow. The others had slowly walked in; he did not. His body seemed airily light.

A breeze had blown by, and then he had already appeared inside their courtyard. At this moment, outside the doorway, an iridescent sword light suddenly shot into the air and flew horizontally across the treetops before disappearing with a flash. At once, the leaves on the trees began drifting down like snowflakes.

The white-clothed man lifted his head to look. Then all of a sudden, with a flutter of his long gown, he made a waving motion towards the sky with his hand. The falling leaves that had filled the sky immediately vanished. Then he, too, disappeared, as if he had suddenly been blown out of there by a gust of wind.

And right at the same time, a low voice was heard from outside the door asking, "Where is Wang Zhangzhu [Manor Master Wang], Wang Dong?"

Standing beneath a white poplar tree two zhang [1 zhang = 3 1/3 metres] was an old man dressed in garments made of a rough, brown cloth and whose head was covered with

white hair. In his hand, he held a large red card, and his gleaming eyes were looking right at them.

The six of them stood there in a row in front of the doorway as if they had deliberately paraded out so the person could watch them.

The brown-clothed man's eyes moved across each one of their faces before he asked in a low tone, "Which one of you is Wang Zhuangzhu?"

Wang Dong: "Me."

The brown-clothed old man addressed him, "I have right here an invitation card. I specially brought it here to invite Wang Zhuangzhu."

Wang Dong: "There is someone who wants to treat me to dinner."

Brown-clothed old man: "Precisely."

Wang Dong: "When?"

Brown-clothed old man: "Tonight."

Wang Dong: "Where?"

Brown-clothed old man: "Right at this place."

Wang Dong: "How very convenient."

Brown-clothed old man: "Yes, truly very convenient. Wang Zhuangzhu only needs to step out of your door and then you will be there."

Wang Dong: "Who is the host?"

Brown-clothed old man: "The host will certainly be here to welcome you tonight. Wang Zhuanghu will definitely be able to see him."

Wang Dong: "If that is the case, then why the need to specially come here and present the invitation card."

"Customs and manners cannot be neglected," the brown-clothed old man stated. "An invitation is always necessary. Wang Zhuangzhu, please accept it." He lifted his hand, and then, the invitation card was gliding slowly towards Wang Dong. It was flying very slowly, very slowly, practically as if there was an invisible pair of hands beneath it holding it up.

Wang Dong gave a little chuckle before responding in an indifferent tone, "So you, sir, specially brought this invitation just so you could allow me to see this one display of qigong [i.e. chi]."

His face grim, the brown-clothed man said coldly, "Wang Zhuangzhu, you laugh at me."

The look on Wang Dong's face also became stern. "Just a moment ago, there were several people who displayed some very attractive martial arts also. Do you, sir, know them?"

Brown-clothed old man: "Yes."

Wang Dong: "Who are they?"

Brown-clothed old man: "Wang Zhuangzhu, why would you need to ask me?"

Wang Dong: "If I don't ask you, who would I ask?"

With a sudden laugh as well, the brown-clothed old man's eyes strayed over, perhaps intentionally or perhaps not, to give Lin TaiPing a glance.

Guo DaLu could not help looking over at Lin TaiPing also, and only then did he notice that Lin TaiPing's complexion was so pale there was no color in his cheeks at all, and his expression was almost the same as the one Wang Dong had had when he saw the kite in the sky.

Could these people be here to find Lin TaiPing?

The brown-clothed old man was gone already.

When he left, Wang Dong had neither tried to stop him nor ask him anything else. Everyone could tell that the people who had come today must have some sort of relation to Lin TaiPing. No one asked him. In fact, everyone even tried to avoid looking at him so he would not feel awkward. Guo DaLu even asked Wang Dong, "What type of qigong do you think that skill he showed a moment ago was?"

Wang Dong: "Qigong is qigong. There is only one type."

Guo DaLu: "Why would there only be one type?"

Wang Dong: "How many types of nu'er hong wine [lit. "daughter red" wine] are there?"

Guo DaLu: "Only one."

Wang Dong: "Why is there only one type?"

Guo DaLu: "Because nu'er hong is already the best wine. No matter what the thing is, if it is the best, then there is only one type of it."

Wang Dong: "If you understand this principle, then why do you still need to ask me?"

Guo DaLu's eyes darted around. "In my opinion, the most frightening thing was still that sword. It basically was like

the Yu Jian [Sword Driving] technique of the legends that could behead someone from thousands of li away.”

Wang Dong: “Far from it.”

Guo DaLu: “How do you know it is far from it?”

Wang Dong: “I just know.”

Guo DaLu sighed and gave a cynical smile. “Why have you suddenly become so unreasonable?”

Wang Dong: “When have I ever been reasonable?”

Guo DaLu: “Rarely.”

Naturally, they were bantering like this because they wanted Lin TaiPing to feel more at ease. However, Lin TaiPing’s face was still pale and bloodless, and even his hands were gripped tightly together in anxiety. He paced back and forth, making several circles around the courtyard. All of a sudden, his footsteps ceased, and he announced loudly, “I know who they are.”

Nobody wanted to start the conversation, but each one of them was listening.

Staring down at the footprints on the ground, Lin TaiPing said, “That man is called Qiang Long [Powerful Dragon], and he is the one among the “Eight Dragons Beyond Heaven” who has the most powerful hard kung fu.”

Wang Dong’s brows came together in a frown. “Eight Dragons Beyond Heaven? Each one of those three people who showed up here just now is one of the Eight Dragons Beyond Heaven?”

“Every one of them,” Lin TaiPing answered.

Wang Dong: "Do you mean the 'Eight Divine Dragon Generals' under the Terrestrial Dragon King?"

Lin TaiPing: "There is only one 'type' of Eight Dragons Beyond Heaven as well."

Wang Dong: "How do you know?"

Lin TaiPing: "I just know."

Wang Dong looked over at Guo DaLu, and the two of them grinned. Guo DaLu remarked, "That's called, 'what goes around comes around', and it certainly came around really quickly."

A pained expression could be seen in Lin TaiPing's eyes. His hands were clenched tensely as he paced around in several more circles. His steps suddenly halted again. "They know who I am as well," he declared loudly.

Guo DaLu could not help joking, "I don't need them to tell me. I know too."

Lin TaiPing stared intently at him. His gaze seemed very peculiar. "Do you really know?"

"Of course," Guo DaLu answered.

"Who am I?" Lin TaiPing asked.

This should have been the easiest question to answer, but for some reason, Guo DaLu could only stare blankly back at him.

Lin TaiPing heaved an unexpected sigh, and the look on his face grew even more agonized as he slowly said, "Nobody knows who I am. Even I do not want to know myself."

Guo DaLu could not stop himself from asking, "Why?"

Looking down at his tightly clenched fists, Lin TaiPing stated, "Because I am Terrestrial Dragon King's son."

When he spoke this one sentence, even Wang Dong showed an expression of astonishment. Guo DaLu stood there dumbfounded. The degree of shock he was feeling was similar to what he had felt when he heard that Yan Qi was NanGong Chou's daughter.

With a forced smile, Hong NiangZi said, "Your father moves about anywhere underneath Heaven unhindered. His aura surpasses everything of this present age. Who in the wulin world does not respect him?....."

Lin TaiPing suddenly cut her off and shouted, "Me! "

Hong NiangZi was taken aback. "You?"

Through grit teeth, Lin TaiPing said, "My only wish is that I did not have such a father."

Guo DaLu frowned. "Even if you are unhappy about the marriage he arranged for you, you still should not..."

Lin TaiPing interrupted again, "He was not the one who arranged my marriage for me."

"He wasn't?" Guo DaLu said in surprise.

There were tears brimming in Lin TaiPing's eyes now, and hanging his head, he explained, "When I was five years old, he left us. From that point onward, I have never seen him again."

Guo DaLu hesitated, "You... you... you have always been with your mother?"

Lin TaiPing nodded. The tears had spilled over now.

Guo DaLu could not ask anymore, nor did he need to ask anymore. He looked over at Yan Qi. Both of them understood in their hearts that it was not odd for a man like Terrestrial Dragon King to dump a woman.

But if the woman who had been discarded was one's own mother, what would the son feel in his heart?

Each one of them felt tremendous sympathy for Lin TaiPing inside, but none of them dared to show it – sometimes sympathy and pity can also stab and hurt someone's heart.

Right then, the only person who could console Lin TaiPing was the little young miss. Everyone was trying to find a way to drop a hint to her and have her stay there alone to keep Lin TaiPing company, but they suddenly noticed that the expression on her face was not all that different from Lin TaiPing's. Her complexion was frightfully ashen, her head was lowered, and she was biting down on her lip so hard she was going to break the skin soon. Could this innocent and kind-hearted little young miss also have a secret that could not be divulged?

Lin TaiPing suddenly started mumbling to himself, "This time, he must have come here to force me to go back with him. He was afraid I would try and escape so he first blocked off every route out of here."

Guo DaLu could not help asking, "What do you plan on doing?"

Lin TaiPing's fists were still clenched together tightly. "There is no way I will go back with him. Ever since the day he left us, I have not had a father." Wiping away his tears, he lifted his head. On his face, there was a resolute expression as he looked at Wang Dong and the others and, speaking each

word clearly, declared, "Anyhow, this whole matter has nothing to do with all of you; therefore, there is no need for any of you to go see him tonight. I..."

All of a sudden, the little young miss spoke, "You do not need to go as well."

Lin TaiPing paused in surprise, staring dazedly for a very long time. "Why don't I need to go?" he finally could not help asking.

Little young miss: "Because the one he wants is not you either."

Lin TaiPing: "If it's not me, then who is it?"

Little young miss: "It's me."

As these words came off her lips, everyone was even more stunned. The one who shook the world, Terrestrial Dragon King, would actually come here to find a young girl who sold flowers? Who could believe that?

But when they saw the look on her face, it was impossible for them not to believe. She seemed to have suddenly transformed into a completely different person. She was no longer shy as she looked directly at Lin TaiPing and asked slowly, "Do you know who I am?"

"Do you know who I am?"

This, too, should have been a very easy question to answer, but Lin TaiPing stood there in a daze.

She stared at him with the trace of a mournful smile showing on the corner of her lips. "Nobody knows who I am. Even I do not want to know myself." Lin TaiPing had just said these

words and now she was saying them again. They should have found this very funny.

Looking at her right then, though, no one, no matter who it was, would be able to laugh. If Yan Qi had not been there by his side, Guo DaLu nearly would not have been able to stop himself from going over to take her hand in his and ask her why she was so sad, so miserable. She was so young, and her life was so beautiful. What problem could there possibly be that could not be solved?

Lin TaiPing had walked over and taken her hand. "It does not matter what kind of person you may be," he soothed. "I only know that you are you."

The little young miss allowed her icy hand to be gripped tightly by him. "I know that your words are sincere, except... you should still ask and find out who I am."

Forcing a smile, Lin TaiPing conceded, "Alright. I'll ask. Who are you really?"

The little young miss's eyes closed, and she answered slowly, "I am your future wife, your mother's future daughter-in-law, but I am your father's enemy from the past."

Lin TaiPing's body all of a sudden froze over. His tightly closed hand slowly let go, falling to his side... His heart sank along with it. It seemed as if it had sunk all the way to bottom of his ice-cold feet and he was standing on it.

Yu LingLong! She was Yu LingLong!

No one could believe it was true. No one was willing to believe it. This gentle, kind, and innocent girl really was that vicious, shrewish, and arrogant "evil, female star" [orig. nu sha xing; a 'sha xing' (evil or malignant star) refers to a

person who brings calamities, hardships, disasters]?
Everyone's eyes were on her.

Her head was lowered, her hair mussed. It looked as if her heart was broken.

Guo DaLu suddenly could not help feeling sympathy in his heart. Exhaling a long sigh, he smiled bitterly and said, "You are the wife that his mother chose, yet you are his father's enemy? How could there be such a complicated relationship in the world? You... you must be joking." Of course he knew that this unquestionably was not a joke, but he still would rather believe that it was not true.

Yu LingLong's smile became even more sorrowful. "I understand your good intentions," she said sadly, "but unfortunately, some things in the world just have to be this way."

"I still do not believe it," Guo DaLu insisted.

Her head hanging low, she explained, "The enmity between Terrestrial Dragon King and our Yu family has been accumulating for many years now. Twenty years ago, he had already sworn that he would see with his own eyes the entire Yu family dead and eradicated.

Guo DaLu cried out unintentionally, "Your father, was he..." He did not dare continue. If Yu LingLong's father had died by the hand of Terrestrial Dragon King, then no one else would be able to help them resolve the hatred of your own father being murdered.

Yu LingLong was shaking her head, though. "My father did not die by his hand." Hatred was showing in her eyes as she carried on in a cold tone, "That's because, even if his

abilities are as great as the Heavens, he still would not have been able to kill a person who was already dead."

Guo DaLu's breathing became easier, but he could not help drawing his brows into a frown and saying, "Your mother..."

"My mother's surname is not Yu. It is Wei," she told him.

"Wei?" Guo DaLu repeated. "Could it be that she is Madam Lin's sister?"

Nodding her head, Yu LingLong continued, "It was for this reason that he let my mother go, but he did not know at the time that my mother was already pregnant with me. I am still surnamed Yu."

Guo DaLu sighed, "He, of course, learned afterward that this person, you, existed."

"That is why I would always avoid him," Yu LingLong explained. "If he was in the north, I would not go to the north; if he was in the south, I would not go to the south. His fame is greater than mine, so for me to hide from him would always be easier than for him to try to find me."

Smiling cynically, Guo DaLu muttered, "I had said it before: it is not a good thing for a person to be too famous."

Yu LingLong: "It is not too bad neither."

Guo DaLu: "In truth, your mother should not have allowed you to become famous. If you really were just a normal girl, perhaps he may never have found you."

Yu LingLong ground her teeth together. "To live like that, what's the difference from being dead?"

Guo DaLu: "There are many people in the world who live like that, and what's more, their lives are very good."

Yu LingLong: "But our Yu family has never had people like that, and furthermore, the Yu family reputation cannot cease with my generation."

Guo DaLu: "Where is your mother now?"

Her voice filled with sadness. "She passed away last year." Nibbling on her lip, she said, "Before she died, she was still afraid that Terrestrial Dragon King would not leave me alone, so she deliberately sought out her younger sister..."

Guo DaLu: "She went to find Madam Lin?"

Yu LingLong nodded. "She hoped Madam Lin would be able to find some way to resolve the enmity between our two families, but alas, even Madam Lin herself was powerless to do anything. And so..."

Guo DaLu: "And so she betrothed you to her only son, hoping that the hatred of your two families could be dissolved away with this marriage."

Yu LingLong: "I think that must have been her intention."

With a glance from the corner of his eye at Lin TaiPing, Guo DaLu remarked, "It is unfortunate that her son did not understand his mother's good intention."

Yu LingLong smiled sadly. "The next generation is never able to understand the previous generation's good intentions. Even I was the same. I, too, had not wanted to be the daughter-in-law of the Lin family." She did not dare look at Lin TaiPing, but her eyes still seemed to unconsciously throw a look in his direction.

Lin TaiPing's entire body seemed to have grown ice-cold and stiff. "Why, then, did you come here to find me?" he asked unexpectedly.

The smile on Yu LingLong's face became even more miserable. In a soft voice, she returned, "You don't understand?"

"Of course I don't understand," Lin TaiPing cried.

Forcing herself to maintain her composure and not allowing her tears to spill over, she asked one more sentence: "You really do not understand?"

Lin TaiPing: "I do not understand! "

Her whole body all of a sudden began trembling and she rasped, "Fine. I'll tell you. I did it only because I had once sworn to you that one day, I would make you beg me to marry you."

Lin TaiPing looked like someone had just struck him forcefully in the chest. He was not even able to keep himself steady on his feet.

Yu LingLong appeared as if she was going to collapse herself.

They did not know how much time had passed until, through gritted teeth, Lin TaiPing spat out each word clearly: "Now I understand... I finally understand! " He did not say anything else. Spinning around abruptly, he dashed back into his room.

"Bang! " The door closed.

Yu LingLong had not looked at him again, but her tears were falling quietly...

End of Chapter 45

Chapter 46 - A Human is a Human

Why is it that right before a storm approaches, it is always gloomily tranquil?

The sky was so clear it seemed as if it had been washed. The sheet of blue stretched on for ten thousand li.

There was no storm. The storm was in the hearts of people.

This type of storm was the most terrifying of all.

Out in the hallway, it was so quiet that the sound of Wang Dong's breathing could be heard coming from his room. His breathing was deep and heavy, and he actually seemed as if he was asleep. It took true skill for someone to be able to sleep in such a time.

Guo Dalu and Yan Qi's whereabouts were unknown. In the eyes of other people, the actions of newlyweds always seem a little mysterious.

Only Hong NiangZi was keeping Yu LingLong company.

Two lonely people. Two broken hearts.

Yu LingLong stared numbly off into the distance. There was nothing in the distance. There was nothing in her eyes. Her entire being seemed empty.

Out of the blue, Hong NiangZi suddenly gave a sigh. "I know you were lying just now."

"Lying?" Yu LingLong responded blankly.

Hong NiangZi: "You came here this time not because you wanted revenge and not because you wanted him to get on

his knees and beg you.”

Yu LingLong: “I don’t want it?”

“In the past, you might not have been willing to be the Lin family’s daughter-in-law, but now, you are willing to be Lin TaiPing’s wife. I can tell.” Hong NiangZi exhaled a long breath. “But I do not understand. Why won’t you tell him?”

Yu LingLong was biting down on her own lip. “If you can tell, he should be able to as well.”

Sighing, Hong NiangZi told her, “You still do not understand men, especially his particular type. He may look like he is very frail, but in reality, he is stronger than anyone.”

Yu LingLong: “Oh?”

Hong NiangZi: “But the strongest people will oftentimes be the most fragile of people. Others only need to hurt him in the smallest of ways, and his heart will break.”

Yu LingLong: “You think I hurt him?”

Hong NiangZi: “You should not have said those words to him. You should have been honest with him, told him the feelings you have for him now, and let him know your sincerity. Only then will he be sincere to you too.”

Yu LingLong gave a forlorn smile. “I understand what you mean. I had originally wanted to do as you just said, but unfortunately...” Her head lowered until it was hanging very low, and she continued in a soft voice, “Regardless of what I do now, it is too late...”

Hong NiangZi looked at her with tender compassion in her eyes. She seemed to see her own reflection in this stubborn,

lonely girl. It was true; it was too late now. Once an opportunity is missed, it will never come back again.

Forcing a little laugh, Hong NiangZi comforted, "Maybe it is not too late. Perhaps you should use some sort of scheme on him. Sometimes when you are dealing with men, you need to scheme a bit. As long as he takes you as his wife, you will be the Lin family's daughter-in-law, and then, Terrestrial Dragon King will not..."

Yu LingLong lifted her head unexpectedly and cut off her sentence. "You do not need to say anymore. I already have my own plans. No matter what, Terrestrial Dragon King is also a person. Why must I be afraid of him?" Although her expression was still sorrowful, stubbornness and pride had filled her eyes. She had always been one who was unwilling to bow her head.

Hong NiangZi had lowered her head now. She knew there was no need for her to say anything else, nor could she say anything else.

All of a sudden, Yu LingLong clasped her hand. "No matter what," she said gently, "I am still just as grateful to you for your kind intentions."

Hong NiangZi: "I know."

Yu LingLong: "But there is one thing you do not know."

Hong NiangZi: "You can say it."

Turning her gaze to Wang Dong's window, Yu LingLong said quietly, "You truly are able to understand people, but yet, why is it that you cannot understand him?"

Hong NiangZi smiled. It, too, was a very desolate smile. A long time passed by before she responded in a quiet tone,

“Perhaps it is because he really is not a person; otherwise, how could he sleep right now?”

Was Wang Dong really sleeping?

Why was there no longer the sound of his breathing in the room?

Terrestrial Dragon King leaned sideways on his soft, tiger-skin bed and stared at Wang Dong as if he wanted to pierce two holes into Wang Dong’s face.

Even Wang Dong felt as if his face had had two holes bored into it. Never before had he seen such eyes. Never before had he seen such a person. The Terrestrial Dragon King of his imagination did not look like that.

What kind of person should Terrestrial Dragon King have been?

Of course, he would certainly be a very tall, well-built man, very mighty-looking, extremely majestic and powerful, red-faced with a long beard, and have a lion-like nose and mouth like the ocean. Perhaps there would be white hairs covering his face, but his waist would be perfectly straight when he stood, just like the gods that you see in paintings.

When he spoke, his voice would undoubtedly be like a mighty bell or a great drum, and it would have the ability to shake your ears until they tingled numbly. And when his anger was about to explode, the best thing you could do was to get far, far away from him. Wang Dong had even prepared himself to listen to his roar of anger.

But he was mistaken.

As soon as he laid eyes on Terrestrial Dragon King, he knew that regardless of who wanted to provoke him into anger, it would absolutely not be an easy thing to do.

Only the ones who never grow angry are the ones who should truly be feared.

His complexion was pale, his hair was very thin, and his beard was not long. His hair and beard were groomed so that they were clean, shiny, and neat, and his hands looked very well taken care of so that it was difficult for anyone to believe they had ever taken someone's life. His dress was simple for he knew there was no longer any need for him to use resplendent attire and precious jewels to flaunt his status and wealth.

He had not stood when Wang Dong entered. No matter who came in, he still would not stand. No matter who it was, no one would blame him.

Because he only had one leg!

Terrestrial Dragon King, the one who had did as he pleased, completely unhindered in the world, who showed disdain for all the heroes of the martial world, was actually a cripple with only one leg.

Inside that enormous tent, it was silent. Besides the two of them, there were no other people.

Wang Dong had come inside the tent for a long time now, and, in a respectful tone, had only said four words: "I am Wang Dong."

Terrestrial Dragon King had not even said a single word in return. Any other person would have thought that he had not heard what was said.

But Wang Dong did not think that. Wang Dong knew that only after he had decided on what to do would he open his mouth to speak.

There are some people who never say a single wrong sentence. He, very obviously, was one of those people. Strangely enough, though, for these kinds of people, even if 10,000 of their sentences were wrong, it still would not matter.

Wang Dong was waiting, standing there waiting.

At last, Terrestrial Dragon King stretched out his arm and pointed at a wolf-skin cushion. "Sit."

Wang Dong sat down.

Terrestrial Dragon King pointed again, this time at the gold goblet on the small table beside the wolf-skin cushion. "Wine."

Wang Dong shook his head.

Terrestrial Dragon King's eyes were clear as he assessed, "You only drink wine with your friends."

Wang Dong: "Sometimes there are exceptions."

Terrestrial Dragon King; "What sort of times?"

Wang Dong: "When I just want to be cursory with a person. But I do not want be cursory with you."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Why?"

Wang Dong: "Because I will never act cursorily towards someone who is worthy of my respect."

Terrestrial Dragon King stared at him. Another long while passed until he gave a sudden laugh and said, "You came early."

Wang Dong: "My intention was never to come here to drink wine."

With a slow nod of his head, Terrestrial Dragon King agreed, "Naturally it was not." He raised the jade cup before him and sipped slowly from it. All of a sudden, like the blade of a knife, his gaze whipped back towards Wang Dong. "You are looking at my leg?"

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "You must be puzzling over who would actually be capable of chopping off my leg."

Wang Dong: "Yes."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Do you want to know who it is?"

Wang Dong: "No."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Why not?"

Wang Dong: "Because, no matter who he may be, I would think he is certainly long dead by now."

Terrestrial Dragon King gave an unexpected laugh. "It appears you are not a person of many words."

Wang Dong: "I am not."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "I like people who do not speak much. The things they say are usually quite reliable."

Wang Dong: "Usually they are, yes."

“Good. Now, you might as well tell me what it is you are here to do.” He did not wait for Wang Dong to open his mouth as he added, “It will be best if you only use one sentence to say it.”

“You cannot kill Yu LingLong,” Wang Dong stated.

Terrestrial Dragon King’s face hardened. “Why not?”

Wang Dong: “If you want Lin TaiPing to continue living, then you cannot kill Yu LingLong.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “If I kill Yu LingLong, Lin TaiPing will die for her?”

Wang Dong: “You do not believe it?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “You believe it?”

Wang Dong: “If I did not believe, I would not come here.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “You believe that there are people in the world who are willing to die for someone else?”

Wang Dong: “Not only that ‘there are people’ but that there are many people.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “Name two for me to hear.”

Wang Dong: “Lin TaiPing. Me.”

Terrestrial Dragon King laughed.

Wang Dong: “You do not believe it?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “You believe it?”

Wang Dong: “Why don’t you make a wager with me?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “What are we betting?”

Wang Dong: "My life for Yu LingLong's life."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "And how will this bet work?"

Wang Dong: "If Lin TaiPing is not willing to die for Yu LingLong, you may take my life at any time."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Otherwise?"

Wang Dong: "You will be free to leave. Therefore, regardless of win or loss, you have nothing to lose."

Terrestrial Dragon King gave a cool laugh. "Nothing to lose?..... The ones who think that way must still have two legs."

Wang Dong: "Even if someone chopped off one of my legs, I would still only seek him out, not his daughter."

The look from Terrestrial Dragon King's eyes grew even sharper. After a long time, he finally said unhurriedly, "You are able to prove that Lin TaiPing would die for her?"

"I cannot; you can," Wang Dong replied. In a slow tone, he continued, "But I believe that he will be here very soon."

Sure enough, someone else showed up.

It was not Lin TaiPing who came; it was actually Hong NiangZi, Guo DaLu, and Yan Qi. When they entered, Wang Dong was no longer inside the tent. From the expressions on their faces, it was apparent that they were just as astonished as Wang Dong had been a moment ago – nobody, regardless of whom it was, would have imagined that Terrestrial Dragon King was such a person.

Their purpose for coming was the same as Wang Dong's because they had the same feelings and confidence in their

friend.

“Confidence” is indeed a very amazing thing. It seems as if it forever will not disappoint – friendship is also the same.

Lin TaiPing did not disappoint them.

Terrestrial Dragon King leaned sideways on his soft, tiger-skin bed and stared at Lin TaiPing. This was his biological son, his only son. It had been nearly fifteen years since he had last seen him. But when he looked upon him, it was no different than when he was looking at Wang Dong.

A long time went by before he stretched out his arm and pointed at the wolf-skin cushion that Wang Dong had sat on a little while ago. “Sit.”

Lin TaiPing did not sit. His body had grown stiff – cold and stiff – but his eyes seemed to have moistened. He was facing his father, the father he had not seen in fifteen years. It was already not an easy thing that his tears had not fallen yet.

Terrestrial Dragon King’s face was still void of expression, but it seemed as if a few wrinkles had suddenly formed at the corners of his eyes. At long last, he exhaled a sigh and said, “You have grown-up, and it appears that you very much have a mind of your own.”

Lin TaiPing’s lips were tightly closed.

Terrestrial Dragon King: “If you are not willing to speak, why did you come?”

Lin TaiPing was quiet for another long moment before he responded, “I know you have never liked listening to useless words.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Yes."

Lin TaiPing: "Is it a must that the entire Yu family is completely exterminated?"

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Yes."

Lin TaiPing: "There is only one person left from the Yu family now."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Yes."

Lin TaiPing's hands were balled tightly into fists, and he spoke each word clearly: "If you kill her, then I must kill one person from the Lin family as well."

His face hardening, Terrestrial Dragon King asked, "Who do you want to kill?"

Lin TaiPing: "Myself."

As Terrestrial Dragon King stared intently at him, the lines by the corner of his eye grew deeper. This was his son – the bone of his bone, the blood of his blood. The blood that flowed in this young man's body was the same blood as his own, just as stubborn, just as proud. Nobody could change this fact; even he, himself, could not. Heaving a deep sigh, Terrestrial Dragon King told him, "You should know that the words spoken by members of the Lin family can never be amended."

"I know. That is why I would say that." He suddenly added, "I also know that there is no grudge or hatred between you and her, and she has never even seen you before."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "And who is she to you? Why is it that you insist she must continue living?"

Lin TaiPing: "Because only if she lives can I continue living."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "The feelings between the two of you are so deep already?"

Biting down on his own lip, Lin TaiPing answered, "At first, I did not know either..."

Terrestrial Dragon King cut off his words as he asked, "When did you know?"

Lin TaiPing: "When you wanted to kill her – will you truly be happy after you have killed her?"

Terrestrial Dragon King was silent.

Lin TaiPing: "You are not certain yourself, right? But I can guarantee that after you have killed her, you will be even unhappier than before you had killed her."

Terrestrial Dragon King's face grew became stony. "You really are willing to die for her?"

Lin TaiPing: "Dying is not easy but neither is it a very difficult thing to do."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "What about her? Is she willing to do the same thing for you?"

Lin TaiPing was quiet.

Terrestrial Dragon King: "You are not sure yourself either, yes?"

Lin TaiPing said slowly, "Maybe it is because the people in her family do not want to kill me and did not take the grudges of the previous generation and place it on the shoulders of us, the next generation."

There was a glint in Terrestrial Dragon King's eyes as he suddenly gave in, "Fine. I will agree to what you say, but I have one condition."

Lin TaiPing: "What sort of condition?"

Terrestrial Dragon King: "If she is willing to sacrifice herself for you, then that will prove that the feelings between the two of you are deep enough, and I will let her go."

Lin TaiPing: "Otherwise?"

In a chilly voice, Terrestrial Dragon King answered, "Otherwise you should know then that she is not worth you dying for her."

Lin TaiPing clenched his fists together even tighter. "Are you making a bet with me? Using her life as a wager?"

Terrestrial Dragon King: "At least the bet is very fair because win or lose, it is herself that decides it."

Lin TaiPing: "How will I know it is fair?"

Terrestrial Dragon King: "I guarantee that you will be able to watch everything, but you must promise me something also."

Lin TaiPing was listening.

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Before victory and defeat has been decided, you are not allowed to interfere - no one, no matter who it is, is allowed to interfere." With a stare like a blade's edge, he spoke each word clearly: "Otherwise, you will be considered to have lost this bet."

At the back of the tent, there hung a heavy curtain. It was extremely dark, and there was no way that one could see

into there from outside. But the people on the inside of the curtain could see out to what was happening before them.

Wang Dong, Hong NiangZi, Guo DaLu, and Yan Qi were already there, and they had heard every sentence, every word spoken by Lin TaiPing. They felt very comforted because Lin TaiPing had not disappointed them.

But what about Yu LingLong? Right then, not only was she holding her own life in her hand but Lin TaiPing's as well. This was Lin TaiPing's own decision, and it was obvious that he had that same confidence in her. Would she disappoint him?

They heard Terrestrial Dragon King ask another question. "Do you know what kind of person she was before?"

Lin TaiPing's answer was very simple: "That is something that is already in the past. Even if I knew, I have already forgotten."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "What kind of schemes did she employ that would cause you to trust her in this way?"

Lin TaiPing: "She used many schemes, but there was only one that was effective."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Which one?"

Lin TaiPing: "She told the truth."

For some reason, when Hong NiangZi heard this reply, she suddenly lowered her head.

And then, Lin TaiPing walked in there as well. As he looked at each of them, his gaze was flooded with gratitude. His friends had not disappointed either.

Eight people sat quietly in front of that tent, so calm that they seemed like eight stone statues. They were Terrestrial Dragon King's 'Eight Divine Dragon Generals' and each one of them by himself was enough to shake-up a part of the world with his might.

Yu LingLong's eyes, though, did not even seem to notice them. She was still dressed in the dark cloth garments of the flower-vendor girl. With her head held high, she walked between them and into the tent. Her expression was very serene, but her eyes carried determination.

And then, she saw Terrestrial Dragon King.

Terrestrial Dragon King did not tell her to sit, but the gaze he placed on her was cutting.

Yu LingLong did not wait for him to open his mouth to speak before she said loudly, "Do you know who I am?"

Terrestrial Dragon King gave a nod of his head.

Yu LingLong: "I am the last descendant of the Yu family. You only need to kill me, and then you will have achieved your desire."

Terrestrial Dragon King remained silent for quiet some time before he finally responded unhurriedly, "That is not my desire."

Yu LingLong: "It is not?"

"That merely is something that I said," Terrestrial Dragon King told her in an indifferent tone.

Yu LingLong: "Everything you have spoken, you have accomplished."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "There is only one that I have not accomplished."

Yu LingLong: "Perhaps you may be able get it done very soon now."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Perhaps?"

Yu LingLong: " 'Perhaps' means that it is uncertain."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Don't tell me you dare to exchange blows with me?"

With a cold smirk, Yu LingLong retorted, "Why wouldn't I dare? Do you really think that you are very incredible?" She did not allow Terrestrial Dragon King to respond as she continued quickly, "If a person does not even have the ability to look after his own wife and son, no matter how amazing he is, it still would be limited."

Terrestrial Dragon King was not angered by her words. "They are able to take care of themselves," he replied dispassionately.

Yu LingLong laughed coolly, "That is their own business. What about you? Have you fulfilled your responsibilities? If the fathers and husbands in this world were all the same as you, I am afraid the women and children would nearly all be dead by now."

At last, Terrestrial Dragon King's face hardened as he asked in a low voice, "You came here just to say these words?"

Yu LingLong: "I am simply reminding you that you still have a wife and a son. It would be best if you did not forget them because they also have not forgotten you."

His voice was cool. "You have reminded me now."

Yu LingLong released a long breath. "Yes. What should be said has all been said." Suddenly throwing her shoulders back and cupping her fist, she said, "Please." She knew perfectly well that she was facing the one who was unmatched beneath Heaven, Terrestrial Dragon King, and also clearly knew that outside the tent, there were those Eight Divine Dragon Generals who struck awe in all the world with their might, but yet there was not even a trace of fear in her expression.

Although her body was delicate and slender, she was filled with determination and courage. Right this moment, the motion of throwing back her shoulders and cupping her fist seemed to faintly give a sense that she could stand up to Terrestrial Dragon King as an equal.

Terrestrial Dragon King gave an unexpected chuckle. "How old are you this year?"

Though Yu LingLong did not know why he would suddenly ask this, she still answered, "Seventeen."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "At what age did you start practicing martial arts?"

Yu LingLong: "Four."

Terrestrial Dragon King's smile was cold. "You have only practiced martial arts for thirteen years, yet you dare fight me?"

Responding with a cold smile of her own, she said, "Even if I have only practiced for one day, I would still contend with you just the same to determine whose skill is higher. And even if we of the Yu family cannot compare to you in martial skills, our bones are always hard [saying that means someone is unyielding]."

Terrestrial Dragon King suddenly laughed long and hard. "Good! So hard are those bones. So great is the courage."

Amid the sound of his lengthy laughter, his body suddenly soared upward from where it had been lounging on that slanted soft bed, as if there was a pair of unseen hands supporting him from beneath him.

Yu LingLong could not help retreating back half a step. She recognized this stance to be the first stance of the legendary "Divine Dragon Eight Stances" called "Submerged Dragon Ascends into Heaven", but she had never imagined that anyone's lightness kung fu could reach this level of attainment.

Who would have thought that while Terrestrial Dragon King's body was flying up into the air, he was still able to open his mouth to speak? In a low voice, he warned, "Beware your right and left 'Qing Ling' acupoints."

In a low voice, he warned, "Beware your right and left 'Qing Ling' acupoints."

The Qing Ling acupoints are located on the inner one-third of the upper arms, and if struck, a person will not be able to raise his shoulders. However, if you do not lift up your arms, people will have no way of hitting those two acupoints.

Smirking coldly, Yu LingLong thought to herself, "Even if I am not your match, it still will not be easy for you if you want to seal my Qing Ling acupoints." She was determined that, no matter what the situation was, she still would not raise her arms up. Given Terrestrial Dragon King's status, since he had already stated clearly that he was going to strike her Qing Ling acupoints, he of course would not attack her anywhere else.

It was at this moment that Terrestrial Dragon King arrived right before her. A powerful rushing sound of wind shook her so that her clothing billowed upwards. She spun her body around. Just as she wanted to use that momentum to dissipate away the force, she heard two “pa pa” sounds, and then she could no longer lift her two arms.

Looking back at Terrestrial Dragon King again, he had already gone back to his soft bed at some point in time, and his manner was just as leisurely as before. No one would have been able to tell that he had struck out in attack just an instant ago.

Yu LingLong’s entire face was flushed red from fury. “You attacked my ‘Jian Jing’ [Shoulder Well] acupoints, not my Qing Ling acupoints,” she accused loudly.

Terrestrial Dragon King replied indifferently, “I do not need you to remind me. I am still able to differentiate between the Jian Jing and Qing Ling acupoints.”

Yu LingLong: “Who ever would have thought that a grown man such as you would not keep his word?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “When did I say I was going to seal your Qing Ling acupoints?”

Yu LingLong: “You said it very clearly just a moment ago.”

“I merely wanted you to pay attention to them. In a fight against someone, every acupoint on your body should be paid attention to.” His voice was unconcerned as he added, “Furthermore, in the way of martial arts, the ability to adapt when facing an enemy, resourcefulness, and flexibility are always crucial. If I cannot seal your Qing Ling acupoint, naturally I should go attack your Jian Jing acupoint.

Since the result is the same and you would have no way of raising your arms anyhow, why then must I strike the Qing Ling acupoint? If you cannot even understand this principle, then even if you train for another 130 years, you still will have no way of becoming a high level fighter.” He carried on and on, like a shifu teaching his disciple or a father or uncle teaching his son or nephew.

Yu LingLong was so enraged her face was alternating between a burning red color and pale white. Gnashing her teeth, she said, “Fine. Kill me.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “You do not submit to this in your heart?”

Yu LingLong: ‘Even if I die, I will not submit.’”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “Fine.”

The word, “fine”, had just left his lips and then, all that could be heard was a whooshing sound. Something unidentifiable was released from his hand and struck her “Shen Feng” acupoint. Yu LingLong only felt a force on her chest that spread out towards her four limbs, and instantly, her arms were able to move again.

“Sealing Acupoints Through the Air” was already an extremely rare top-tier martial art. Who could have imagined that this Terrestrial Dragon King could actually “Unseal Acupoints Through the Air”?

Yu LingLong was gritting her teeth together. Even though she knew that her opponent’s martial arts were fathomless and immeasurable, she was still prepared to go all out and fight him.

However, her body had just swept upwards and she had not even executed a single stance yet when she suddenly felt a

warm wind blowing towards her. Her left and right “Qing Ling” acupoints tingled. Then, her body was falling back to the ground and once more, she was unable to raise her two arms.

Turning her eyes to Terrestrial Dragon King, she saw that he was again reclined on his soft bed. His expression still remained relaxed, as if he had never even moved.

Yu LingLong’s face was the color of ashes. Even if she was more proud, she could still tell now that if Terrestrial Dragon King wanted to take her life, it would be as easy as lifting his hand. In front of Terrestrial Dragon King, her martial arts, which had amazed other people before, had become something where she did not even have the opportunity to strike.

Terrestrial Dragon King looked at her. “Will you submit now?” he asked unemotionally.

Breathing out a long sigh, Yu LingLong admitted, “Yes.” She gave an unexpected laugh and very quickly added, “But what I submit to is your martial arts ability, not you as a person.”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “Oh?”

Yu LingLong: “Even if your martial art is unmatched beneath Heaven, as a person, you are a petty and bigoted scoundrel. Even if you crushed the bones of every one of us in the Yu family and scattered the ashes, still no one would submit to you.”

Terrestrial Dragon King’s face darkened. “Little girl, very sharp a tongue you have. You would actually dare act so audaciously in front of me.”

With a cool smile, Yu LingLong replied, “Why wouldn’t I dare? I am not even afraid of death; what else do I have to fear?”

There was a glint in Terrestrial Dragon King’s eyes. “Yes,” he murmured softly. “If a person knows perfectly well she is going to die, what would she not dare do and what would she not dare say?” The hint of an unusual smile appeared on the corner of his lips as he continued, “But what if I agree to not kill you?”

Yu LingLong paused a moment in surprise. “What... what did you say?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “Not only will I not kill you, I will not even injure a single hair of yours. The gratitudes and grudges between my family and yours will also hereafter be written off in one stroke.”

Yu LingLong: “Rea... really?”

Terrestrial Dragon King: “When have I never kept the promises I stated?”

Yu LingLong suddenly felt her body go weak so that she nearly could not remain standing. Just a moment ago, she had faced a powerful enemy of unprecedented might. Even when she knew it was certain death, she had still fearlessly held her head high. But now, when he promised not to kill her, her legs actually went weak instead. Only at this instant did she discover that she actually did not want to die.

If a person has the chance to keep on living, who truly would want to die?

Terrestrial Dragon King’s sharp, piercing vision seemed to have seen into her heart. He carried on slowly, “So long as

you promise me one thing, I will immediately let you go, and henceforth, will never seek you out again."

Yu LingLong could not help asking, "What is it?"

Terrestrial Dragon King: "So long as you do not bring up the arranged marriage between yourself and my son and so long as from this day onward, you will never see him again."

The look on Yu LingLong's face transformed again. "You... you want me to never see him again?" she quavered.

"From now on, you will simply pretend as if there was never such a person in this world. You will act as if you had never before met him. You will still be able to live just as well as before." He gave a sudden laugh and told her indifferently, "There are many men in the world. Perhaps you will very quickly forget about him."

Yu LingLong's face was pale, and her body was starting to quiver again. "What if I do not agree to this?"

In an unconcerned voice, Terrestrial Dragon King responded, "Why wouldn't you agree to it? After you are dead, isn't it true that you would not be able to see him anyway?"

Slowly, Yu LingLong shook her head. "It is not the same... not the same at all."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "How is it not the same?"

With a sad smile, she told him, "You would not understand. People like you will never understand." Though her smile was sorrowful, her eyes seemed to be filled with happiness.

Because she had loved.

This type of feeling could neither be replaced by anything nor could it be snatched away by anyone! Regardless of whether her love was bitter or sweet, at the very least, she was much more blessed than those people who had never loved before.

As Terrestrial Dragon King looked at her expression, his countenance also seemed to change. From a jasper pot, he suddenly poured out some bright green wine and said in a serious tone, "If you truly will not agree to it, drink this glass of wine. Hereafter, you will have no more worries."

Yu LingLong's gaze was fixated on that cup of poisoned wine as she spoke each word clearly: "I can only promise you one thing."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "What is that?"

Turning her eyes to look off at some place in the distance, she replied, "I cannot forget him, and I will not forget him. Regardless of whether I am dead or alive, he will forever be in my heart. No matter how great your abilities may be, you still cannot do anything about this."

All of a sudden, she darted over and drank that glass of wine.

And then, her body immediately crumpled to the ground.

But the corner of her lips still showed that mysterious, blissful smile. It was because she knew that from now on, whether in the Heavens or beneath the earth, no one would be able to tell her to forget him...

Terrestrial Dragon King seemed to be stunned.

The world really did have such people, such love. This truly was something he would never be able to understand.

Lin TaiPing had rushed over and thrown himself on top of Yu LingLong's body. Terrestrial Dragon King did not look at him, could not bear to look at him.

They did not know how much time had passed when Lin TaiPing finally rose to his feet. His face had drained of all color, and his eyes were bloodshot as he glared at him and cried hoarsely, "You promised me..."

Terrestrial Dragon King could only exhale a long sigh. He seemed as if he, too, did not know what he should say.

Lin TaiPing: "You promised me that you would be fair, but now..."

Cutting him off, Terrestrial Dragon King admitted, "I know this was not fair, but there are many things in the world that are not fair. If a person wants to continue to be alive, he must learn how to put up with these types of things."

"I won't be able to learn it, never will I be able to learn it." The look on his face suddenly grew very mysterious, very peculiar, and it almost seemed that on his lips, there was a trace of that same smile as Yu LingLong's. Slowly, he said, "I only know that no one in the world is able to make her forget me, and no one is able to make me forget her..."

Hearing this and seeing the expression that was on his face, Guo DaLu could not contain his own hot tears from brimming over his eyes and flowing like a stream. He understood people like this, feelings like this. He knew Lin TaiPing did not want to live either, and he could not help leaping to his feet and wanting to charge out there.

But for some reason, Wang Dong pulled him back and said softly, "Wait a little longer."

"What are we still waiting for?" Guo DaLu hissed back.

Light glinted in Wang Dong's eyes. "Just wait a moment and you will know."

At this moment, though, Lin TaiPing had already drank the entire jug of poisoned wine. "I, too, had made a promise to you that if you killed her, I would kill someone from the Lin family."

He had killed himself.

He also collapsed to the floor, falling on top of Yu LingLong. Two people, the corners of their lips showing the same smile – a smile that was blissful and mysterious...

Two people, the corners of their lips showing the same smile – a smile that was blissful and mysterious...

Guo DaLu's eyes had reddened, and he was about to grab Wang Dong by the collar and demand to know why he had to wait. However, in that instant, a mysterious and alluring voice was heard. "You have lost."

A person, tall and graceful and with outstanding elegance had suddenly appeared within the tent. Shockingly, it was Lin TaiPing's mother, "Madam Wei." Her lips were turned up in that same mysterious smile.

Guo DaLu had paused in surprise again. How could she see her son lying dead before her and still be able to smile?

The look on Terrestrial Dragon King's face was very unusual also. Was it joy? Or pain? Smugness? Or disappointment?

After a long time had went by, he finally nodded his head slowly and exhaled a long sigh. "Yes. I have lost."

Madam Wei: "You should know now that not everyone is like you and only lives for themselves. Now you should realize that this world has many things that are more important than your own life."

Terrestrial Dragon King lowered his head. Suddenly, he smiled. "At least I have not realized this too late."

Her eyes looking intently at him, Madam Wei repeated, "Not too late?"

Terrestrial Dragon had lifted up his head again to gaze back at her. "Not too late."

A very peculiar emotion surged from both their eyes as they suddenly looked at each other and smiled. Their many years of misunderstandings and grudges seemed to have transformed into the spring breeze with that one smile.

He had always been deeply ingrained in her heart and unforgettable to her, so how could he truly do anything that she could not forgive, not understand? But her son...

Terrestrial Dragon's eyes were still on her. Smiling, he said, "He has already drank the most bitter cup of wine of their entire lives. Now, you should let them have a drink of one that is sweet."

Madam Wei's voice was soft. "Everyone should drink some sweet..." She suddenly turned her head back to smile at Guo DaLu and the others, who were still behind the curtain. "All of you should now understand what is going on. Why are you not coming out to have a cup of sweet wine?"

Guo DaLu still did not understand; Yan Qi, however, did.

“The first one who made a bet with Terrestrial Dragon King was not Wang Laoda,” Yan Qi explained. “It was Madam Wei.”

Wang Dong added, “For her son’s happiness, she was willing to seek out Terrestrial Dragon King and make this bet.”

Yan Qi: “Her wager was the same as ours. She knew that there are many people in the world who are willing to sacrifice themselves for someone else. That is why she has won.” She was gazing at Guo DaLu, her eyes filled with tenderness.

Taking her hands lightly in his own, Guo DaLu said gently, “Yes. People who understand this principle will never lose.”

Wang Dong: “The wine that Terrestrial Dragon King gave them to drink was of course not poisoned wine.”

Of course it was not.

Because Lin TaiPing and Yu LingLong had risen to their feet now and were wrapped tightly in each other’s embrace. Now, nobody in the world was able to separate them because they had possessed the courage to drink the bitterest cup of wine of their lives.

Bitter wine, but not poisoned wine.

Did you know that there is a very mysterious wine in this world that allows someone to escape from the mortal world for a short while and then come back to life again? Did you know the world has many mysterious things that exist specially for people who are sincerely in love?

Guo DaLu turned to Wang Dong. “You pulled me back just now. Did you know ahead of time that it was not poisoned

wine?”

Wang Dong: “I did not know – but I did know that there is not a single father out there who could harden his heart to poison his own son. I believe that, so long as you are human, you will have human nature in you.

Guo DaLu: “You had faith?”

Wang Dong: “Yes! ”

With a sigh, Guo DaLu remarked, “No wonder you never lose as well.”

The only ones left behind the curtain were Hong NiangZi and Wang Dong.

Hong NiangZi’s head was lowered. “They are all waiting for you outside. Why aren’t you going out yet?”

Wang Dong: “What about you?”

Hong NiangZi: “I... I am not good enough to be with all of you.”

Wang Dong: “Why are you not good enough?”

Tears shone in Hong NiangZi’s eyes, and her head still hung low. “Because I was the same as Terrestrial Dragon King. I had never understood that true love does not need to be gained through scheming. If you want to have a person’s love, you can only use your own genuine love and exchange for it. There is absolutely no other method.”

Wang Dong: “But now you know?”

Hong NiangZi nodded.

Wang Dong: “If you know now, then it is still not too late.”

Hong NiangZi head whipped up suddenly and she looked deeply at him with eyes filled with hope. "It is still not too late?"

Wang Dong was gazing back at her, and his voice became warm and gentle. "Not late. As long as you are able to truly understand that principle, it will never be too late." He reached out and held her hand in his as tenderly, he said, "Therefore, we should go out now to drink a sweet cup of wine with them. We have drank too much of our own bitter wine already."

The wine was sweet – sweet and beautiful. Only people who can persist through the tests and endure the obstacles can drink this type of wine. And only they are worthy of drinking it.

With a golden goblet in hand, Terrestrial Dragon King looked at his son and daughter-in-law. "I have treated you both unjustly. I should make up for it. Whatever you wish for, I will give it to you."

Lin TaiPing: "We do not want it."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Why not?"

Lin TaiPing: "Because what we want, no one can give to us. Even you cannot."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "Even I am not able to give it to you? Who can give it to you then?"

Radiance glowed from within Lin TaiPing's eyes. "Ourselves. Only ourselves."

Terrestrial Dragon King: "What is it that you both want?"

Lin TaiPing: "What we want, we already have now." He held onto his wife's hand, his eyes filled with joy and contentment. The freedom, love, and happiness they desired, they now all had. This certainly was not something given to them by someone, nor was it something that could be given to them.

If you also wish to have freedom, love, and happiness, then you can only use your faith, determination, and courage to exchange for it. Apart from this, there is no other way.

Absolutely no other way.

They understood this truth, and therefore, they were able to attain it. Hence, they forever were very happy.

Who said heroes are lonely?

Our heroes are happy!

THE END

A Chat About Wuxia Novels
(in lieu of a preface)

Huan Le Ying Xiong [A Happy Hero; or Happy Heroes] is another new attempt because wuxia stories have reached a point where they should be evolving.

In many people's minds, not only are wuxia novels not literature or part of the literary arts, they even cannot be considered as novels. It is just like an earthworm, which, although it can move, is not considered an animal by many people.

Admittedly, this view was created because of some people's biases, but we ourselves cannot shift off all responsibility either. Indeed, wuxia novels are sometimes written so that they are too fantastical and absurd, too dripping with blood, and it is forgotten that "human nature" is the only thing that must not be lacking in any novel.

Human nature is not limited to anger, hatred, sorrow, and fear, but it also encompasses love and friendship, generosity and chivalry, humour and compassion.

Then why do we have to deliberately emphasize only the ugly face of it?

Furthermore, our generation of wuxia writers had started approximately with Pingjiang Buxiaosheng's Jianghu Qi Xia Zhuan [Legend of the Strange Heroes of Jianghu] and could be considered to have experienced a transformation with Wang Dulu's Tie Qi Yin Ping [The Armoured Steed and the Silver Bottle] and Zhu Zhencai's Qi Sha Bei [Seven Killing Stele]. With Jin Yong's She Diao Ying Xiong Zhuan [Eagle Shooting Heroes; aka Legend of the Condor Heroes], there was another transformation, but since then, it has been over ten years [greater than 10, less than 20] already.

In these ten plus years, the several thousands and hundreds of types of wuxia novels that have been published are already innumerable. Some storylines have practically become cliché and overused styles. Veteran readers only need to read the beginning and then they will be able to guess the ending.

Therefore, if wuxia authors wish to raise their own status, they must change; if they wish to increase their readers' interests, they also must change.

Someone said that wuxia should shift from the “wu” [martial] to the “xia” [encompasses meanings of knight-errant, hero or heroic, chivalry]. To put this in even simpler words, it means that wuxia novels should be written with a little more about light and a little less about darkness, a bit more human nature and a bit less blood.

Someone also said that with this change, the essence of wuxia stories would be denatured, and it would no longer be “genuine” wuxia. Some readers would not be able to accept this, nor willing to accept it.

Perhaps these two views are correct, but that is why we should try new things, continuously try. Although we may not entertain any extravagant hopes that people will view our wuxia novels as “literature”, we should at least hope that people will view them as “novels” and that they will share similar status as other people’s novels – similarly able to inspire people’s hearts, similarly able to strike a sympathetic chord.

Every section in Huan Le Ying Xiong can nearly be viewed as an independent story. Even if they are read separately, it does not take away from the charm – and if it still has a little bit of charm, then this new attempt cannot be considered a failure.

Notes

[←1]

An ancient Chinese instrument of torture used by officials in court.

[←2]

An ancient measure of time. 1 shi chen = 2 hours

[←3]

Awl (𐎠𐎺𐎧) is a long pointed spiked tool used for marking surfaces or making small holes.

[←4]

From the Analects of Confucius. The full translated text of this particular one is “As I walk in a group of three, I will always find a teacher. Choose to follow what is good in them and correct what is not good”

[←5]

A poet of the Northern Song dynasty. He was known to have had a passion for plum blossoms.

[←6]

A unit of measure where 1 dou = 1 decalitre. Also, is a dipper or cup-like object measuring 1 dou

[←7]

Chinese folklore. Dong Yong was a filial son who worked hard to support his father. When his father passed away, he did not have enough money to properly bury him, and hence, he sold himself to get money for the funeral. This act touched the Seventh Fairy (seventh daughter of the Jade King of Heaven), who went down to earth (and ended up marrying him), and in 3 months, helped him earn the money he needed to repay his debt. There is more to the story, of course... Dong Yong is believed to have been a true person who lived in the Han dynasty, who's filialness became the subject of folklore.

[←8]

Diao qian generally means 1000 [ancient] coins,
although, throughout history, it has been used to say 10
or even 100 coins

[←9]

] 粽子 Zongzi is a glutinous rice dumpling wrapped, then tied up, within leaves.

[←10]

Qing Ming Jie is a major Chinese festival in early spring where people pay their respect to their ancestors and sweep the graves of family members who have passed away

[←11]

Shen Luo Dian is in hell and is where Yama, the judge of the dead, resides. [shen luo = “many things connected together” or “continuing without bounds”; dian = a palace hall]

[←12]

A saying that was originally a line from a poem. The poem paints the picture where, in a setting of perilous mountains and tortuous rivers, all of a sudden, a village appears surrounded by beautiful flowers and willow trees that cast a cool shade. It means that you have shifted from an adverse circumstance to a favourable one.

[←13]

Of the Three Kingdoms period. Zhuge Liang was the renowned military strategist (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuge_Liang) and Cao Cao a warlord (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cao_Cao) of the time.

[←14]

orig. Kunlun nu; term once used for dark-skinned, non-Chinese slave

[←15]

Cutting sleeve – Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty was reputed to have had a homosexual relationship with Dong Xian. Rather than awakening Dong Xian, who was sleeping on the emperor's sleeve, Emperor Ai cut off his own sleeve so as not to disturb Dong.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dong_Xian

Dividing peach – Mizi Xia was one of the favoured (male) subjects of the ruler of Wei. One day, as they were walking through an orchard, Mizi Xia picked a peach and tasted it first. Upon finding it sweet, he gave the half-eaten peach to the ruler, who was delighted at Mizi Xia's love that he thought first of him

[←16]

Two lines within the poem "Pipa Xing" written in the Tang dynasty. Credits to this site <http://www.chinese-tools.com/forum/r...ml?q=17%2C8745>, which has a translation of the entire poem, as I merely reworded slightly their translation of those two lines.

[←17]

Orig. tu di miao; shrine to worship Tu Di Gong [tu di means 'earth'; gong literally means 'old man'].

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu_Di_Gong These shrines were numerous as they were in nearly every

[←18]

Xingxiuhai literally translates to 'Sea of Constellations'. Located in the Qinghai province, it is a long and narrow low-lying geographical area of very high elevation. Its surface is covered with wetlands and numerous lakes of varying sizes. If one was to look at it from high above, those still waters would seem to sparkle under the sunlight, similar to glittering stars amid the night sky.